

HOW SHOULD I TREAT NON-CHRISTIANS AND PEOPLE OF OTHER RELIGIONS?

Jonah 3:1-5; Psalm 62:5-12; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20

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"The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, 'Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.'" Jonah 3:1-2

"Jesus said to them, 'Follow me and I will make you fish for people.'" Mark 1:17

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

We live in a nation becoming increasingly religiously diverse. At the time of the Revolution Presbyterians and fellow Calvinists made up over 25% of the population. Most Americans rarely met non-Christians. Now followers of Islam in the States outnumber Presbyterians. The number of Hindus in the States is also growing. I was in a check out counter several weeks ago. The man behind the counter looked Asian. I thought I recognized a Pakistani accent. I said, "Are you a Pakistani?" Big mistake! He began to rant about Pakistani Moslems. "Terrorists! Fanatics!" He was a Hindu from Indian expressing typical hostility that divides Hindus and Moslems. American Buddhists have increased to about a half a million. Several years ago my mother attended the wedding of a Japanese-American cousin in a Buddhist temple in California. She felt uneasy participating in a non-Christian ceremony until she discovered that the Buddhist priest was assisted by our cousin's Baptist minister. We don't have to travel around the world to meet Buddhists, Moslems or Hindus, not to mention New Age religionists. Non-Christians live next door and down the street. We live in an increasingly religiously pluralistic nation. How should we, as Christians treat non-Christians and people of other religions?

The Bible helps answer that question. The world of the Bible was as religiously pluralistic as our own. In our Old Testament lesson God sent Jonah as a missionary to cruel enemies of God's People. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria. Assyria was the Nazi Germany of it's day. The mention of *Nineveh* sent shivers up and down the backs of God's People. Say *Nineveh* and God's People saw enemy troops pillaging, raping and murdering. They said, "Let Nineveh go to hell!" But God wanted to save Nineveh. So he sent Jonah to call them to

repentance. Amazingly, the Ninevites responded and God saved them. The book of Jonah is a tract against religious exclusivism. Jonah tells us that *there's a wideness in God's mercy, like the wideness of the sea*. The prophet Jonah tells us that God loves God's enemies.

Now turn to our Gospel lesson. Jesus spotted two young fishermen, Simon and his brother Andrew. "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." He went a short distance and saw James and his brother John in their boat mending nets. He called them as well as many others to follow him. After his death and resurrection the followers of Jesus cast out the Gospel net throughout the Roman world and gathered in men and women from countless non-Christian religious backgrounds. In the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ both Jews and Gentiles experienced the grace, love and mercy of the living God in wonderful and unheard of ways. Men and women long divided by race, creed and ethnic division became united in Christ. The preaching of the Gospel was meant to unite, not divide people.

God wants to save the entire world. By *save* I mean, not only save from hell (although that's included) but save from mutually assured destruction if we don't make some drastic changes. The time is growing short if we're to escape the Green House effect. The time is growing short in Africa where AIDS stalks an entire generation. The time is growing short in the Middle East, in the Balkans, and Chechnya. God wants to save, not only Christians, but Jews, Moslems, Buddhists, agnostics and atheists. God doesn't want to condemn God's enemies. God wants them as friends. So God calls us to bear witness to God's grace made visible in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. One of the primary purposes of every Christian is to allow God to use us to proclaim the good news in word and deed.

That doesn't mean Jesus wants us to be religious bigots. We can share our faith without putting others down. There's nothing wrong with holding in the greatest respect religious traditions quite different from our own and at the same time saying that Jesus is Lord and Savior. We can be convinced that Jesus Christ is the only Savior and Lord without becoming a fanatic who condemns all other faiths and despises the aspirations of the humanist and agnostic (David H.C. Read).

The cause of Christ is never advanced by ignorance and contempt for the religious beliefs of other people. But neither can Christians affirm that all religions are equally true and simply alternative ways to God. I have the greatest respect for the devout Buddhist who believes that *Nirvana* represents the truth about ultimate human destiny. But I believe that the Christian doctrine of eternal life is true. No juggling with words and ideas can make *both* true. Similarly, Christians and Moslems share many beliefs about God, but a devout Moslem finds our belief in the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ deeply offensive. A very liberal Jew and a very unorthodox Christian might agree that their religions were almost identical, *but an orthodox Christian and an orthodox Jew both recognize that, with all the common bonds that exist, a real matter of truth is at stake: Was Jesus the Messiah (David H.C. Read)?*

The new study catechism of the Presbyterian Church asks, "How should I treat non-Christians and people of other religions?" Listen to the answer: "I should meet friendship with friendship, hostility with kindness, generosity with gratitude, persecution with forbearance, truth with agreement, and error with truth. I should express my faith by word and by deed. I should avoid compromising the truth on the one hand and being narrow-minded on the other. In short, I should welcome and accept these others in a way that honors and reflects the Lord's welcome and acceptance of me."

I believe it's a wonderful answer. *First*, we should meet friendship with friendship. I challenge you to invite a non-Christian friend to dinner not to convert them but to develop a friendship. *Your* life will be enriched and challenged as well as theirs. *Secondly*, we should meet generosity with gratitude. A story is told over and over in our family. Back during the Great Depression my father was out of work. It was Christmas Eve and no gifts. One of my father's closest friends, Izzy, was a Jew. On Christmas Eve Izzy drove out from Wilmington with a car loaded with gifts. New leather shoes for my sisters and brother. A new dress for my mother. A new suit for my dad. Plus toys and candy. We saw in Izzy's generosity a striking resemblance to his Jewish brother Jesus. Christians should meet the generosity of non-Christians with gratitude. *Third*, we should meet persecution with forbearance. Many of

you are familiar with a true WW2 story told in a Gregory Peck movie, *The Scarlet and the Black*. Monsignor O'Flaherty, an Irish priest, helped hundreds of Jews escape Nazi Germany during WW2. He was targeted by a ruthless Nazi commander who attempted unsuccessfully to murder the priest. After the war the Nazi commander spent the rest of his life in jail for war crimes. Father O'Flaherty visited his persecutor in jail every week for the rest of his life. In 1960 the former Nazi requested baptism and was received into Christ's church. Christians should meet persecution with forbearance.

One of the most memorable men I ever met was a Sri Lankan Christian, Dr. D.T. Niles. He preached and gave a series of lectures at Princeton Seminary when I was a student. On one occasion he asked, "How many of you have non-Christian friends?" Almost everyone raised a hand. Then he asked, "Do you ever feel sad that they aren't Christians?" Then I realized that I do feel sad when I think of my non-Christian friends. That doesn't mean I believe they're going to hell or that my sadness is condescending. Rather it's the sadness of not sharing with someone ~~what is most meaningful in my life.~~ -I can affirm that Jesus is the Way and the Truth and the Life while at the same affirm that God's grace, love and mercy extends far beyond the boundaries of the Christian church. *But* I do believe that nowhere do we see God's pure grace, God's unbounding love, and God's compassionate mercy as we do in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. I believe faith in Jesus, the crucified and risen Lord, gives us our best hope to unite our divided world.

If we believe that salvation is by the sheer grace of God for undeserving sinners, we'll look at non-Christians without the slightest trace of smug self-congratulation, exclusive superiority, or condescending pity. We'll look at them with a feeling of compassionate solidarity. For when we look at them we see what we are too, and we know that the same saving grace of God promised to *us* sinners is promise to "those sinners" too (Shirley Guthrie).

Let us pray: Loving God, through your Son you have called us to repent of our sin, to believe the good news, and to celebrate the coming of your kingdom. Like Christ's first apostles, may we hear his call to discipleship, and, forsaking old ways, proclaim the gospel of new life to a broken world; through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.