

# **Voices: Do we want what is good or what is expedient?**

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“Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think on such things” (Philippians 4:8).

The Apostle Paul wrote these words to the church at Philippi as an encouragement to set their hearts and minds on things far greater than this world. His was a call to transcend petty selfishness and childish desires. His encouragement extends to all believers down through history. It is a privilege we will get to exercise for an eternity beyond it.

What a shame, then, that we rarely seem to care about any of what should occupy our minds. Christianity is faith bursting with beauty, teeming with truth, loaded with loveliness, and rife with righteousness. Yet, we yawn at what we should yearn for. Why?

## **Removing the beauty from faith**

It’s the same reason the arts are the first thing to be cut when a school runs into financial troubles; beauty isn’t practical. Truth isn’t always expedient. Righteousness doesn’t bring us power. Purity isn’t one of the keys to success. Nobility doesn’t help us climb the corporate ladder.

We even see it in our preaching and teaching, because all preaching must be practical. This isn’t to say practical preaching doesn’t work. People do need some help applying truth to their everyday lives. But shouldn’t we fear what we lose when preaching becomes too practical?

There is no beauty in technical writing. No instruction manual ever has moved a person to tears. When the poetry is removed, what are we left with but wooden words?

I fear our modern faith has become far too practical, focused primarily—or even entirely—on what it can do for us or how it can serve us, when it should be about how we can serve God and what we can do for others.

Religion has been practical in the past, too. Our ancestors served whatever god they thought brought the most blessings, was most beneficial to their craft, or was the strongest and best able to protect. Their faith was about survival and personal advancement more than love, sacrifice, beauty, righteousness, nobility or any of the highest things Paul called the Philippians to think on.

## **Confused about our faith**

So, what is our faith about? Many of us would be hard-pressed to say our faith truly is about God. Rather, it's about us. This truth is reflected in our worship songs, books and preachers who gain the most widespread following. Like the crowds Jesus fed, we are offered the bread of eternal life but only care about the bread that satisfies our present hunger.

We drag Jesus down from the cross and slap a catchy slogan on him. We parade him as a mascot behind which to hide our self-serving hearts. We pretend we aren't taking the Lord's name in vain or mocking the Savior we call, "Lord."

We don't pick ideologies, political affiliations, life philosophies and movements based on biblical teaching. We twist and warp our theology to fit into the box already constructed by those things. Then, we wonder why our faith is so unrecognizable to some and unappealing to others.

A Bible-less theology enables us to remember God's wrath, but not his love. We claim all people are made in God's image with one breath and then scream, "God hates gays!" with the next. We declare the sanctity of life one moment and call for the death of our least favored politician the next.

We claim unwavering support for justice, while blaming an innocent Black man for his own murder. We cross oceans to serve in Third World countries mere days after voting in support of policies that grind the downtrodden underfoot.

We spend just as much time worshipping the things God gives us as we do him. We spend just as much time serving our own reflection as we do Jesus.

## **Letting go of the world**

So, if God spoke from heaven tomorrow and told us we were wrong—that he isn't who we thought he was; that doing some of the things we do, supporting some of the things we support, believing some of the things we believe maintains distance between him and us; that truly to follow him meant renouncing all those things—would we still choose him?

Or would we build our golden calf, worship it and call it "Christianity?"

Do we serve Christ or ourselves?

Do we seek after him for the bread of life, or are we settling for mere bread?

Do we want what is good or what is expedient?

Often, following Christ means sacrificing the latter for the former. And it is worth it. Beauty is worth it. Righteousness is worth it. Purity is worth it. Nobility is worth it.

Christ is worth it.

We must take up our cross, deny ourselves, and follow him.

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