

NICK. Exactly. Now, as I already said, by thinking and acting as though Christ's death were unnecessary, the religious moralist arrogantly relegates God's greatest demonstration of love to the status of an unnecessary act—something people can do just fine without. And this proves that he doesn't love God.

JOHN. How so?

NICK. To the moralist God is nothing more than a demanding Judge who tells us how to behave, punishes us when we misbehave, and rewards us when we do good. If we are rewarded with entrance into heaven, it is because we *deserve* to be rewarded. In other words, salvation is not a gift, but a paycheck. In a system like that, where wages are earned and paid according to what is due, there is no place for thankfulness, let alone love. We simply get what is coming to us.

JOHN. So if the decent person gets to heaven because of his own decency, his love and thankfulness would logically be directed toward himself, not God.

NICK. That's right. The moralist may claim to love God, but his supposed love is just another good deed that is earning him God's approval. It cannot be a response to God's unmerited favor in Christ, because the moralist thinks he can *earn* God's favor. This is just the opposite of what 1 John 4:19 says: We love God *because He first loved us*. His love for us is the *cause* of our love for Him.

JOHN. But how does His love for us *cause* us to love Him? Do we just suddenly find ourselves loving Him, or is there a thought process involved that convinces us to love Him?

NICK. There is definitely a thought process. When I came to understand my own sinfulness along with the just penalty for all the sins I had committed, the truth about Christ's loving sacrifice on the cross evoked a response of love. I felt an affectionate gratefulness toward God for His gift. I thought, "I deserved to die and go to hell for my sins, and I could do nothing to help myself. And yet this holy and just God punished His perfect Son in my place in order to save me." But because the "decent person" doesn't think this way about himself or about Christ's death, he has no reason to love God for sending Christ.

JOHN. So are you saying that the true Christian, the person who rightly understands the gospel, *will* love God in return?

NICK. Absolutely. The absence of heartfelt affection for God is proof that the gospel has not been truly understood or embraced. The person who doesn't *believe* the gospel, and love God *because of* the gospel, is not a true Christian, no matter how "decent" he is.

If anyone does not love the Lord, he is to be accursed.

(1 Corinthians 16:22)

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The Indecency of Decency

Explaining the Gospel to Those Who Don't Think They Need It

Daryl Wingerd

I invite you to eavesdrop on a conversation between two Christians, Nick and John. Nick is explaining the basic difference between two categories of people: those who love God, and those who don't. He will also explain that the second category, people who don't love God, may be subdivided into three smaller categories: atheists, believing pagans, and religious moralists (also known as "decent people").



NICK. The person who truly loves God does so because his affections have been supernaturally transformed by God's Spirit. Because he has been born again,¹ his greatest desire is to please the One he now loves through heartfelt obedience to Jesus Christ.² The Holy Spirit, who now dwells in him, provides him with the desire and the ability to love God in this way. The person who doesn't love God, on the other hand, may be a decent person by all human standards. He may be a church-going, law-abiding, hard-working, friend-helping, money-donating, truth-telling, wife-loving, evil-condemning person. But the fact is, he is able to live this morally decent life, apart from any genuine affection for God, because of what every person possesses naturally.

JOHN. And what is that?

NICK. Several things. For example: human reason and intellect, a conscience, a certain amount of personal resolve, a natural sense of duty to do good to his fellow man, and an innate sense of obligation to obey his Creator.

JOHN (*with a hint of friendly sarcasm*). I think you're forgetting something. Some people don't even believe that God exists. They're called *atheists*.

NICK. You're right, but you're also wrong if you're implying that atheists don't know any better. Atheists deny the existence of God in their conscious thinking, but the Bible tells us that even though they suppress their knowledge of God, they do *know* He exists.³ I'm talking about the deepest levels of knowledge, things that are cataloged in the recesses of the mind but don't come out in conscious thought or conversation. The person suppressing these truths may not even be aware that he is doing so. God has given him over to "a depraved mind,"⁴ so that he deceives even himself.

JOHN. So the atheist *knows* God exists but doesn't *believe* God exists?

¹ John 3:3, referring to regeneration. God has given him a new heart (also see Ezekiel 36:26-27).

² John 14:15, 21, 23, 24

³ Romans 1:18-23

⁴ Romans 1:28

NICK. Yes. That’s a very good way of putting it.

JOHN. OK. So what’s the second kind of person who doesn’t love God?

NICK. The second kind is the believing pagan—the person who openly acknowledges that God exists, but lives his life as though He didn’t exist, or at least as though God has no authority over him. This is the person who pursues sin without serious thought of God’s requirements or of sin’s penalty. He even jokes about partying in hell with all of his friends.

JOHN. I’ve known people like that. I used to be one before I was born again. But now I’m curious. What’s the third kind of person who doesn’t love God?

NICK. The third kind is the decent person who believes that God exists, and that He has a moral standard that should be upheld. This is the church-going, law-abiding, hard-working, friend-helping, money-donating, truth-telling, wife-loving, evil-condemning person I mentioned earlier.

JOHN. But isn’t that the description of a Christian—the person who believes in God and thinks everyone should obey Him? People who aren’t true Christians don’t even *want* to obey God, do they?

NICK. Believing that God exists and attempting to obey Him is not the complete description of a Christian. It is also not entirely true that unbelievers don’t want to obey God. Many unconverted people are fully convinced that God exists, and have a natural sense that obeying Him is the right thing to do. Their conscience bears witness to this natural knowledge every day. You might say their desire to obey God is due to their desire to have an undisturbed conscience. The problem is, this kind of obedience is offensive to God. There is a certain indecency in being a “decent person,” as people like these often describe themselves.

JOHN. I’m not sure I understand.

NICK. There are two types of deceived people in this world—two types of deceived “believers,” that is: First there are those who call themselves Christians and yet show no outward evidence that they have been born again. They habitually display the same kinds of sinful attitudes and actions as people who claim no faith in Christ, and yet they falsely consider themselves to be saved because of a prayer they once prayed or some other past religious experience. Then there are the professing Christians, or people who claim to “believe in God” according to the teaching of some other religion, who are morally decent people, at least in their own estimation and that of others who know them. Nevertheless, they have not been born again and are not bound for heaven. God’s Spirit is not dwelling in them, producing genuine love for God or heartfelt obedience to Christ. The person in this category, the “decent person,” is also sometimes called a “religious moralist.”

JOHN. But how can a person who understands and believes much of what the Bible says, and practices good behavior, be indecent in God’s sight?

NICK. The religious moralist is indecent in two ways: First, he offends God in that he doesn’t obey for the sake of God’s glory, as Paul says everyone should.⁵ Instead he obeys (or at least gives the outward impression that he is obeying) for the purpose of self-preservation, self-satisfaction, and comparison with other people. He practices good behavior, in other words, because he thinks his moral decency by itself should result in God accepting him into heaven. At the deepest level, he wants to be able to say, “God owes me His approval in comparison with other people who are more wicked than me,”⁶ or, “God would never send a decent person like me to hell.” His obedience is ultimately self-serving and self-promoting, not a testimony to the glory of God’s grace in Christ.⁷ Therefore his “good behavior” is repulsive to God, like the filthy garments Isaiah spoke of.⁸

JOHN. I can see how that kind of mindset would offend God. It has pride and self-sufficiency written all over it—like saying “No thanks” to God’s grace. But I find it puzzling to think that a professing Christian would think that way. Has a person like this not been taught about his own sinfulness and the necessity of Christ’s death on the cross as a payment for sin? Why would a person who believed like that even need Christ to die for him?

NICK. First of all, many who call themselves “Christian” have never heard the true gospel, and are still trapped in the deceit of the “decent person” mentality. Second, you make a good point about Christ’s death. If it were possible to please God by being a “decent person,” the cross would have been completely unnecessary.⁹ Most importantly, by expecting to be approved on the basis of moral decency, the religious moralist is *admitting* that he considers Christ’s death unnecessary. What could be more offensive to God than that?

JOHN. I agree. What’s the second aspect of the religious moralist’s indecency?

NICK. By relying on his own decency he proves that he doesn’t love God.

JOHN. Even though he says he does, and feels like he does?

NICK. That’s right. Let’s see if you can answer this question: How can we be sure that the religious moralist doesn’t really love God?

JOHN. Well, if a person considers Christ’s death unnecessary, then he wouldn’t have any reason to love God. Doesn’t the Bible say that Christians love God because He first loved us?

NICK. Yes, in 1 John 4:19. And how did God demonstrate His love for us?

JOHN. By sending Christ to die on the cross. Everyone knows John 3:16 . . . “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son . . .”¹⁰

⁵ 1 Corinthians 10:31

⁶ Romans 4:4

⁷ Ephesians 1:6

⁸ Isaiah 64:6, also see Romans 10:2-3

⁹ Galatians 2:21

¹⁰ Also see Romans 5:8; 8:31-39; Ephesians 5:2; Titus 3:4-5; 1 John 4:9-10.