

Must Nice People Repent?

No doubt you know some nice people, well respected by others and an asset to the communities in which they live. Their agreeable personalities allow us to enjoy pleasant relationships. We all wish that more people could relate to others in such a friendly, respectable manner.

Now the question is this: When people live in such a way as to gain the respect and good will of others, will God also accept them on the same basis? How do they fit into God's declaration of universal guilt and His all-inclusive call to repentance? "For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). "God ... commandeth all men everywhere to repent" (Acts 17:30). Shouldn't the fact that they are accepted of men also make them acceptable to God? Why would they need to confess that they are sinners and call on God to save them? (That's what repenting is.) Can repenting or not repenting really make the difference for them between heaven and hell?

Yes, it's just that serious. Here are a few reasons why:

First of all, Jesus never excused nice people from repentance. He said, "Ye must be born again" (John 3:7) not to some thief or foul-mouthed person, but to nice Nicodemus. Nicodemus, as far as we can tell, was a decent, sincere man - a respected religious leader.

Second, Jesus said, "I am the way ... no man cometh unto the Father but by Me" (John 14:6). He that "climbeth up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber" (John 10:1). Dare we think for a moment that by simply being nice, friendly, decent, and more or less religious, we can earn our way to heaven? If we think that, we are trying to climb up some other way.

Third, Jesus died for everyone. If all we have to do to enter heaven is to do our best, then Christ died in vain. That's right. The apostle Paul said in Galatians 2:21, "If righteousness come by [obeying] the law then Christ is dead in vain." If all that anybody has to do to be safe for eternity is to pay his bills, go to Church, and smile, then our Lord's agony on the cross was much ado about nothing.

Fourth, nice people have more to repent of than we realize at first. God says, "Be ye holy; for I am holy" (1 Peter 1:16). Are they holy? That is, do they love and hate the same things that God does? Are their inner life and thoughts free from pride and wrong desires? If not, isn't it obvious they need to repent?

The Bible also says, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind" (Luke 10:27). "Be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Romans 12:2). "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). If we do not meet these conditions, is it any wonder that we need to repent?

Nice people who do repent are quick to admit that they never were all that good. Consider what they have to say: "Our home was in bad shape. I don't mean that we were getting a divorce or anything like that, but it wasn't in good harmony."

"A good home and a number of good friends had saved me from a wild life during my youth. Nevertheless, ... I have lived my whole life for myself, in petty selfishness, pride, and pleasure. For the first time, I realized that I had been trying to hold the world in one hand and the Lord in the other."

So then, how does a nice person repent?

When one nice, law-abiding young man asked Jesus, "What lack I yet?" Jesus replied, "One thing thou lackest: go thy way, sell whatever thou hast" (Mark 10:21).

Jesus says something very much like that to us today. "Whatsoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be My disciple " (Luke 14:33). We too must sell ourselves out to the Lord, losing the old pride and selfishness we treasure so much. We must confess to the Lord that we are, after all, mean, low-down sinners and ask Him to wash us clean in His blood and make us saints.

Repentance, of course, is just the beginning. We have to accept God's children as our brothers and sisters and seek fellowship with them. We need to read God's Word and obey His commands. Repenting is more than just turning around: it means traveling in the opposite direction.

But that might not be as hard as it appears to someone who has never repented. There is something about turning around that makes you want to travel in the right direction. That "something" is actually a Someone, the Holy Spirit whom God gives to every believer. Besides, once we repent, we see through our old selves and wonder how we could ever have been so self-righteous.

Remember, the Bible doesn't promote the idea that we should merely be nice. It commands us to be holy. Perhaps the word holiness reminds some people of robed monks, folded hands, upturned eyes, and sanctimonious expressions. But God's holy people are simply those who have chosen to follow Jesus Christ, who apply His teachings to everyday life, and who have God's Spirit living within them. Their expressions of kindness and consideration spring forth, not from a desire to be accepted or to impress people, but from spiritual life within them.

Remember, if nice people did not have to repent then there would be people in heaven who got there by giving flowers, writing poems, and patting children's heads. But God requires far more than that. His Word declares it again in Hebrews 12:14, "Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord."