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Putting It Simply

You have a choice:

(1) For 10 minutes, you can do as God wishes. You can do the right things for the right reasons. You can follow the Golden Rule and “applies equally”. You can see people as other persons like yourself. You can be a decent person. You can help others be decent. You can appreciate the variety of people and appreciate how various kinds of people make the world more interesting and better. You can work hard to make the world better. You approach loving your neighbor. It all tends to come together.

OR

(2) You can go to a pleasurable place for all eternity. The happy place might be Heaven or it might be a Dharma system in which the eternal journey is the destination.

You can't have both.

What do you choose? I choose (1). I choose to do as God wishes and to do the right things for the right reasons for a mere 10 minutes.

If you choose the pleasurable place, then you have chosen wrongly. Christianity, Islam, most Hinduism, much Buddhism, and most common Taoism, tell people to go for (2). They are wrong.

Stereotypical Judaism says to follow the Law regardless of (1) or (2). Judaism is wrong too unless by “the Law” it means concrete acts based on (1). Would you rather do (1) for 10 minutes or follow the Law perfectly your whole life? The stereotype of legalistic Judaism is wrong but there is enough confusion in Judaism parallel to what I say here so Jews might want to pay attention anyway even if the stereotype is wrong. The Law is not the successful compromise between (1) and (2).

Christianity and Islam, and most versions of Hinduism and Buddhism, try to have both. The real goal, though, is (2), not (1). (1) is only a means to (2). You do such and such and such so as to invite the Grace of God so as to get (2). The real goal is to be saved. They say you can only get to (2) through doing (1) plus having God on your side through Grace. All that is wrong. If you try to get to (2) through (1) then you denigrate (1), you are not doing (1), and likely you will not get (2). If you use (1) as a means to (2) then you are not doing (1) and you cannot get (2) that way. If you try to use (1) to get to (2), then you try to force God to be extra good to you. You try to make up God's mind for you.

Only if you mostly forget about (2) can you do (1) well. If you do (1) well, then you don't worry about (2). Do not try to forget about (2) so you can do (1) as a roundabout way to get (2). Really try to forget about (2) and really focus on (1). Really forget about (2). Let go of (2).

(1) is not a means to (2). If you try to use (1) as a means to (2), almost certainly you will fail at (1) and so fail in your only means to get to (2). (You might succeed this way if you try for so hard and so long that you wear yourself out and give up – but that is another essay.)

I am not asserting faith over works. That is wrong too. Lutherans, Calvinists, and all people in the same boat try to believe not because of intrinsic truth but as a way to get saved and go to heaven. There is no point denying this. I have read too many Protestants and heard too many Protestants. I am saying give up all desire to get saved and go to heaven even through pure faith. Rest in faith alone, and do what the source of faith asks you to do. Forget about salvation and heaven.

I am not asking for purity of motive. I know that nobody does (1) perfectly. We don't have to. I know that wanting (2) is only natural and we can never entirely get rid of the desire. I only dream of doing (1) purely maybe once for one minute in my whole lifetime. That is a worthwhile goal in itself. Learn to live with a lingering desire for (2), a desire that doesn't matter much. Ideally I should not seek (1) as a goal, an achievement, but simply hope to act well. But I am human, and it helps me to think of someday achieving (1) for a few minutes, so it helps me to work toward (1).

To seek (1) does not get in the way of enjoying life and enjoying things other than (1). In fact, I think it helps a lot. I think seeking heaven, avoiding hell, seeking enlightenment, and avoiding suffering, get in the way a lot. I think seeking to avoid suffering gets in the way of enlightenment.

Soren Kierkegaard wanted people not to waffle in mere bourgeois Christianity or to wallow in modern chic wishy-washy self-serving relativism-in-name-only. He wanted no excuses. He wanted people to choose one-way-or-the-other: Is Jesus God? What does that mean for our lives either way? How did his life and death change the world? And how do we live accordingly? I want people to choose also but not that choice. That choice often is deadly. I want people to make the choice above, yes or no, (1) or (2). If Kierkegaard were alive I would make him choose. I would make Kierkegaard choose either (1) as above or (2) Jesus is God, died to remove your sins, and, if you can make yourself believe enough, you go to heaven. You choose (1) or (2) above. You choose. And live accordingly. Maybe Kierkegaard suffered because he knew this was the real choice.

I can't make it any simpler than this.

Taoists would say we have to let go even of (1). They are wrong but here is not the place to into why they are wrong.