

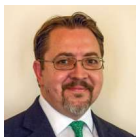


THEOLOGY 101

ASISEBIT/GETTY IMAGES

What do you say when FAMILY MEMBERS CLAIM RELIGION DOESN'T MATTER AS LONG AS YOU'RE A GOOD PERSON?

▶ **Theology 101 is focusing on the topic of evangelization. Specifically, the task is to offer some ways of approaching various questions Catholics may encounter from co-workers, family and friends regarding the practice of the faith. Of course, we must remember that nothing can replace the power of witnessing to the Good News through our own actions and words, combined with our willingness to accompany others on their faith journey.**



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THE QUESTION:

At a recent family gathering, several of my family members were saying that it doesn't matter what religion you are, as long as you are a good person. What can I say?

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FIRST THINGS FIRST

■ One of the first things you can do is to agree that being a good person is important. You can also acknowledge the goodness of your family members' underlying desire. That is, they are seeking some common, unifying value capable of overcoming the divisions and conflicts that are often attributed to differences in religious beliefs.

At the same time, you need to examine your own reaction to this statement. Is it true? Is the goodness of a person the point of all religions? Do religions merely represent different paths to the same goal and are they, therefore, all equally valid and true?

MANY PATHS, SAME GOD

■ The claim that all religions are equally valid and true since all represent different paths that lead to the same destination is well-intentioned. However, this position seeks to build unity among people and religions by, in essence, negating religion altogether. To hold that all religions are equally valid and true is to say that no religion is ultimately valid or true. Every religion makes absolute truth claims, many of which contradict the absolute truth claims of other faiths.

THE TRUTH, THE WHOLE TRUTH AND NOTHING BUT THE TRUTH

■ Next, you might gently probe your family members' position to see if their assertion is capable of accomplishing its goal of transcending religion in order to attain unity. A great way to do this is to simply ask them questions. For example, a few fundamental questions would be: What does it mean to be a good person? Who determines the definition of a good person? What are the criteria for determining whether someone is good? Where do the criteria come from? Why are these the criteria and not some other criteria?

Questions like these reveal we simply cannot assert the absolute truth of something without making a dogmatic claim at the same time. Absolute truth claims are by nature dogmatic.

So, when we say being a good person supersedes religion, we are creating a new dogma that "good" behavior transcends all other religious truth. We are establishing our own truth as the criterion against which all other claims of truth must be measured. It's as if being a "good" person is now a religion in itself.

THE TENSION

■ We often try to escape the tensions of life, but life happens precisely in the tension. Rather than deal seriously with the competing truth claims of different religions through the hard, long work of dialogue, mutual respect and a commitment to seeking the truth together, we are sometimes tempted to search out shortcuts to avoid healthy, necessary conflict in the name of peace. Your family members' statement offers you the perfect opportunity to model what this means in practice.

Certainly, being a good person is an important step to establishing peace between people. The question remains, though: Is it enough? Does being a good person represent the fullness of the truth?

Our Catholic faith would answer with a clear "no." It is Christ's death and resurrection that save, not our being good. Yes, we are to try to be good people (a tremendous challenge given that we live in a fallen world plagued by sin), but more so we are called to the life of Christian discipleship — a discipleship that finds its fullest expression at the intersection of the Tree of Life that is the wood of the cross. †

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

CONSIDER PRAYERFULLY READING THE FOLLOWING GOSPEL PASSAGES:

As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up, knelt down before him, and asked him, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus answered him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: 'You shall not kill; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness; you shall not defraud; honor your father and your mother.'" He replied and said to him, "Teacher, all of these I have observed from my youth." Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said to him, "You are lacking in one thing. Go, sell what you have, and give to [the] poor and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." At that statement his face fell, and he went away sad, for he had many possessions. Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" (Mk 10:17-23)

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

1. How might this passage speak to the assertion made by the family members?
2. What does it have to say about our ability to be good?
3. What does Jesus' conversation with the rich man mean for the claim that being a good person is all that matters?

EVANGELIZATION QUIZ

Who said the following?

[T]he Lord has created us in his image and likeness, and has given us this commandment in our heart: Do good and do not do evil. The Lord has redeemed all of us, all of us, with the blood of Christ: all of us, not just Catholics. Everyone! ... And we all have a duty to do good. And this commandment for everyone to do good, I think, is a beautiful path towards peace. If we, with everyone doing his own part; if we do good to others, if we meet there, doing good, and we go slowly, gently, little by little, we will make that culture of meeting: we need that so much. We must meet one another doing good. 'But I don't believe, Father, I am an atheist!' But do good! We shall meet there.

- A. St. Ambrose
- B. Pope Benedict XVI
- C. St. Isidore
- D. Pope Francis

ANSWER: D POPE FRANCIS

