

Religious books are big business. In the United States alone, the sales revenue for them has been over \$500 million per year. About 50 million religious books are sold each year, both fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary. But with so many books to choose from, how do you know which ones have value? Which ones are bad, which ones are good and which ones are great? What would you say is the best Christian book of all time?

An organization called InterVarsity Christian Fellowship tried to figure this out a few years ago. Their Emerging Scholars Network had a "Best Christian Book of All Time Tournament," and the final four turned out to be: *The Cost of Discipleship* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien. *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis. *Confessions* by Saint Augustine. In the end, *Confessions* edged out *Mere Christianity* for the top spot, the "Best Christian Book of All Time." But it is Lewis' book that we want to briefly look at this evening, as we explore a letter written by the Apostle Paul to a church in the Thesolonica.

Mere Christianity was published for the first time 68 years ago, in 1952. Oddly enough, it wasn't even written as a book. During the darkest days of World War II, Lewis prepared four sets of radio talks on basic Christianity, and they evolved into the book *Mere Christianity*. Since 1952, the book's popularity has grown, and between 2001 and 2016, it sold 3.5 million copies in English alone. On top of this, it has been translated into at least 36 languages. For many Christians, *Mere Christianity* is their favorite religious book apart from the Bible.

So why is *Mere Christianity* one of the best Christian books of all time? According to church historian George Marsden, C.S. Lewis "was determined to present only the timeless truths of Christianity rather than the latest theological or cultural fashions." The book is his attempt to explain and defend "the beliefs that have been common to nearly all Christians at all times."

Timeless truths. Common convictions. *Mere Christianity*.

You might say that in his first letter to the Thessalonians, the apostle Paul is trying to do something similar. He is determined to present timeless truths, and to explain and defend the common

ground of the Christian faith. Paul is not interested in creating a distinctively Thessalonian Christian; instead, he wants to help people to be merely Christian. He knows that such Christians will be "sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ."

So what are the timeless truths that Paul presents? He begins with three imperatives: "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances." Now, at first glance, these instructions may strike us as a bit odd and out-of-touch with the painful realities of our lives -- illnesses, breakups, failures, natural disasters, losses involving a loved one, or a job, being quarantined. We would understand if Paul said "rejoice often" ... "pray regularly" ... and "give thanks whenever good things happen." But instead he says that we are to rejoice, pray and give thanks constantly, without regard to the difficulties we experience in our lives.

Paul offers this form of advice, his suggestions for living a Christian life, because he is focused much more on God, and on Jesus, than he is on himself. His eyes are on the culture of heaven, not on the ways of the world. Rejoicing, praying and giving thanks are important because they are "the will of God in Christ Jesus for you," Paul says. Since there is nothing more important than "God in Christ Jesus," and nothing more true than the fact that "God in Christ Jesus" has created us and redeemed us, then following the guidance of "God in Christ Jesus" should be at the very center of our Christian life.

In *Mere Christianity*, Lewis offers a similar perspective. He stands aside and points toward God rather than toward himself. He doesn't say "look at me," notes Marsden, but instead he says "look at that." Lewis guides us from unbelief to faith, pointing to "the time-tested beauty of God's love in Jesus Christ."

By opening ourselves to God's love in Jesus, we are able to love one another. By trusting God to be at work in every situation, we are able to "rejoice always, to pray without ceasing [and] give thanks in all circumstances." All of this comes from God, who instills in us the ability to love, and rejoice, and pray, and give thanks. "When you teach a child how to write," says Lewis, "you hold their hand while they form the letters: that is, they form the letters because you are forming them." The same is true for God -- we love because God loves, and God "holds our hands while we do it."

Being focused more on God and on Jesus than on ourselves, and trusting God to work through us - that's the first step in being "merely" Christian. It requires leaning more on his divine power than on human power, more on the Lord than on ourselves. "Give up yourself," writes Lewis, "and you will find your real self. Lose your life and you will save it. Submit to death, the death of your ambitions and favorite wishes every day ... and you will find eternal life." As Jesus himself said, "Those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

The next timeless truth concerns our Christian behavior: "Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil." A person who is "merely" Christian is open to the power of the Spirit of God, blowing where it will, and doing the work of transformation. Lewis is clear that "becoming Christian isn't an improvement, but a transformation, like a horse becoming a Pegasus."

In a magazine called the *Leadership Journal*, pastor and author Gordon MacDonald wrote an article on "How to spot a transformed Christian." These folks don't look different from the general population, but they do have characteristics that are signs of inner changes. One of the most important is a passion for reconciliation. "They bring people together," writes MacDonald. "They hate war, violence, contentiousness, division caused by race, economics, gender, and ideology. They believe that being peaceable and making peace trumps all other efforts in one's lifetime."

Remember Robert Frost's line? "Something there is that doesn't love a wall"? Transformed Christians are good examples of the "something" that doesn't love a wall. Instead, they are stirred into action whenever they see a wall. MacDonald says that they take action in the community when they see "dividing walls that separate people, each of whom was made uniquely and loved by God." Transformed Christians "do not despise the words of prophets." Prophets such as Zechariah, who says, "These are the things that you shall do: Speak the truth to one another, render in your gates judgments that are true, and make for peace." Transformed Christians follow the apostle Paul in holding fast to what is good and they abstain from evil.

On campuses across the United States, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship stresses racial reconciliation in large-group meetings for praise and worship, small-group Bible studies, and summer camps for leader training. Their focus is not on political correctness, but on the words of the Bible. Leaders point to Jesus' prayer in John 17 that his followers would all be one, and to the description in Ephesians 2 of Christ breaking down the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile.

People who are "merely" Christian tend to behave in a particular way. Instead of quenching the Spirit, they let it fill them and transform them. Rather than tumbling into evil, they hold fast to what is good. Listening to the words of the prophets, they work for peace and reconciliation. All of this prepares them well for "the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ."

In this season of Lent, let's focus on the life of Jesus. His earthly ministry, and his sacrificial death on a cross should lead us to "rejoice always, to pray without ceasing [and] to give thanks in all circumstances." His life of love and service demonstrates for us how to "hold fast to what is good [and] abstain from every form of evil." Best of all, we don't have to do this by our own power, because the God "who calls [us] is faithful, and he will do this." With the help of God, who has the power to opens our lives when we open our hearts to him, with the guidance of his Holy Spirit, and with the assistance of the Bible and other great Christian books we can be "merely" Christian. And that's the best type of Christian to be.