

Why are some unbelievers more virtuous than Christians?

From Nikola,

We know of some unbelievers who manifest the kinds of virtues like the “fruit of the Spirit” in Galatians 5. How can they do this if they are not born again? Some show more love, joy peace, kindness and self-control than many Christians I know. Why is that?

Dear Nikola,

Good question! My dentist in Ecuador was one of the most kind and generous persons I have met. He gave abundantly to charities and worked for free on the needy. We were friends, though he wanted nothing to do with the gospel.

Let's remember that all human beings are the image of God, though fallen in sin. God's common grace has preserved mankind from falling to the depths of demons. Man's ability to manifest virtues remains as a part of that common grace.

Nothing in the Bible suggests that Christians are externally more virtuous than unbelievers. Although the apostles insisted that salvation is not by good works, they never said the works of unbelievers were absent, only that such were inadequate for salvation.

I am using the term “works” to include the virtues you mentioned. Exhibiting them surely involves works of some kind.

The question contains some assumptions.

Are those virtues enough to please God?

Jesus said,

...unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Matthew 5:20

In this sense, it doesn't matter whose righteousness is superior. We all fall short. That is why we need the perfect righteousness of another, that of Jesus Christ, attributed to us by faith in him.

...and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— Phil 3:9

The whole point of the gospel is this: The righteousness in which we stand approved by God is not our own but the righteousness of Christ and his alone. Ultimately, it makes no difference whose level of virtue is superior.

Is the “fruit” miraculous?

The fruit of the Spirit is not the same as the supernatural manifestations of the Spirit such as mentioned in 1 Corinthians. The term “fruit,” especially in the New Testament, refers to righteousness in general and is not necessarily miraculous in origin.

The Holy Spirit works to encourage these in us but this doesn't mean they are impossible without him. The human conscience God has put in all of us is sufficient to some degree otherwise the unsaved would have no virtues or good works at all.

Looking at the greater context of Galatians, from which the term “fruit of the Spirit” is taken, we see the issue was not about who has the most “fruit.” The question is how the Galatians were going about obtaining these virtues. They were attempting to achieve them by following laws. Ironically, this is legalism and quite sinful in itself. They were sinning by pursuing sanctification in the wrong way.

O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. ² Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? ³ Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? Galatians 3:1-3

How then do we grow in holiness?

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. Galatians 5:16

This sounds annoyingly ambiguous but it is the key. Learning to be attentive to the inner promptings of the Holy Spirit – consistent with the word of God – is the way to pursue the fruit of the Spirit that God values.

Do virtues make up for sin?

If virtues could balance out sin, there would be no cross. In the best of unbelievers, resides the sin of unrepentance. If a person were truly intent on pleasing God, they would do the first two things God commands: Repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. (Acts 20:21)

Jesus spoke about certain people who will appear before him in judgment. Some will say, “*have we not prophesied in your name, cast out demons and done great works?*” Jesus says, “*I never knew you; depart from me you workers of lawlessness.*” (Matthew 7:21-23)

Notice the lack of repentance...“*workers of lawlessness.*” Covering up sin by religious works or virtues. God ignores that game.

The problem of autonomy

Autonomy was Adam's declaration to be independent from God. All unbelievers stand on this same platform. The entire foundation of everything they do, therefore, has a sinful basis and none of it is acceptable to God, including their good works.

Paul said, *"There is none righteous, no not one... no one does good, not even one."*
Romans 3:9-20

It seems like an exaggeration but when we consider the platform on which unbelievers stand, it makes sense. That is why in the Reformed faith, our Westminster Confession declares that the good works of the unregenerate are in fact sinful, even though the works in and of themselves are good. In the unbeliever, the works are not done for the right motive, the glory of God, nor in the right manner—consistent with his word. The works are unacceptable until their persons are accepted and that comes only through the new birth.

We are not called upon to compare ourselves with anyone other than Christ. God promises to bring us to complete sanctification. *He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.* (1 Thess 5:24)

Blessings on you,
Roger