

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Stoicism is Good, but It Isn't the Gospel

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Stoicism's opening premise fails to understand that, from its conception, the heart is a thorny bramble.

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Stoicism has made a comeback. Not that it was ever completely gone, but there's no question that it now takes pride of place in many American institutions. Although originating with Zeno of Citium in 312 BC, Stoicism is the philosophy of choice today within US military and corporate cultures, wherein it goes by the name of "mindfulness", "resiliency training," or sometimes simply "grit." There are books that bear the same as titles, all championing modern-day Stoicism. In its various manifestations, but especially in counseling, it employs to considerable effect Cognitive Behavioral Theory. In fact, Stoicism has found a welcome home in au courant pulpits, where its practicality melds nicely with "your best life now" messages. The problem is, however, Stoicism isn't the gospel, so it shouldn't be preached as such.

There is an undeniable lure to Stoicism, with many of its principles overlapping with Christianity. For instance, it offers its adherents a resource for life's challenges, steels the nerves for hardships, and provides perspective. None of these aspects should be disagreeable to the baptized. What is more, it makes universal appeal to human rationality with disciplines every reasonable person can practice in order to master self-control, one of its four cardinal virtues (the others include justice, courage and wisdom). Self-control, of course, is not only a major theme in Christian sanctification but an aspect of the dynamic "fruit of the Spirit" ([Gal. 5:5](#)). In terms of ethics, the earliest Stoics turned their attention to how mankind may achieve happiness. Christianity, too, is deeply

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concerned about ethics and the pursuit of a godly life of joy and peace. To get there, however, Stoicism takes a route entirely different from faith in Jesus Christ. It not only takes a different route, it winds up in a different place, too.

Stoics sought to discover peace of mind (*ataraxia*) through *imperturbability* — the ability to remain aloof over that of which you have no control, so that you are not disturbed or perturbed by external circumstances that are controlled by the fates or (more in keeping with today) the laws of nature. Consequently, the individual person cannot shape or control or influence events. But each of us *can* control our emotions. While we may be captive to the machinations of predetermined laws and unpredictable human encounters, nevertheless we do have emotional freedom. Peace of mind, then, comes through the practice of imperturbability. The way to happiness is to realize that you cannot do anything about your present situation except embrace “passive resignation” in order to achieve *ataraxia*. Herein lies the power of being human: self-control.

Put into the more recognizable terminology of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), modern Stoicism aids persons to understand their minds, specifically the relationship between ourselves and our thoughts and feelings. CBT uses techniques like negative visualization to aid people to inoculate themselves from undesirable thoughts and feelings by intentionally imagining possible negative outcomes and imaging how you might respond in accordance with your role or duty. This gives the person a sense of power and control over themselves in any situation through preparedness. Further, it liberates the will, empowering the person to “be themselves” without caring much about what others think or societal expectations. Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius, one of the best known Stoic thinkers, aptly summarizes the Stoic mindset: “If you are distressed by anything external, the pain is not due to the thing itself, but to your estimate of it; and this you have the power to revoke at any moment.”

From this position of imperturbability, Stoicism encourages personal behavioral changes through living in accordance with the four virtues of wisdom, courage, justice, and self-control. Personal behavioral changes come from three things. First, recognizing each of us is but one individual in vast sea of humanity, adrift on a pale blue dot within a colossal universe. You’re not that significant, so prioritize what matters in the moment and throughout your brief life. Second, get comfortable with being uncomfortable. See how it feels to be deprived of some good thing. Now, go and be more tolerant of others and grateful in your disposition. Lastly, “remember you will die” (*memento mori*). In light of your pending death and the extinguishing of your existence, live as intentionally and presently as possible — in other words, strive for your best life now, circumstances and unsavory personalities notwithstanding. This is one of the most treasured aspects of

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modern Stoicism — its personal practicality and individual perspective are self-justifying. If there is some aspect to Stoicism that you find unwelcome — no problem! Tailor it to whatever gives *you* peace of mind.

But this also evidences critical issues with modern Stoicism. Whereas the ancient form argued that the wise person is one who knows what his or her role/duty is and acts accordingly, modern Stoicism advocates “mindfulness” through principles of reason. However, due to the failure of the rationalistic Enlightenment, our postmodern milieu is decidedly post-rational. Behavior is largely the result of visceral reactions, sentimentalism, and emotionalism — the core behind today’s radical individualism. What is more, one’s feelings and behaviors are quite divorced from a sense of duty or traditional roles. Such norms have been demolished, right down to gender roles and parental duties. People may be imperturbed by others, but it's the kind of narcissism that actually doesn't care about others. Hence the meteoric rise of abortion, homelessness, crime, alienation, isolation, loneliness, suicide, conspicuous consumerism, and entitlement. All of this should sound familiar from the lips of the Pharisee who, in his laudable self-control, said, “God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get” ([Luke 18:11-12](#)). But neither was he justified.

The Gospel of Christ doesn't merely train the mind; it addresses the heart:

“For each tree is known by its own fruit. Indeed, figs are not gathered from thornbushes, nor grapes from brambles. The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks”
([Luke 6.44-45](#)).

Stoicism’s opening premise fails to understand that, from its conception, the heart is a thorny bramble. Jesus, on the other hand, brings salvation and renewal to a fallen and captive human condition. Jesus, through the gift of faith and the Spirit, supplants the thorny, nay, stoney heart and makes it new from above, not through the powers of human reason below. “And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you” ([Ezek. 36:26-27](#)). The major problem with ever-competing philosophy, including Stoicism, is that it so elevates human potential that theoretically

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persons can self-justify within their system — even if that system is closed and there is no God. Correspondingly, such systems render the need for rescue from ourselves and renewal from above, as well as reconciliation unnecessary, much less reconciliation through blood atonement. In other words, when philosophy takes on the complexion of religion, then it turns its back on Christian theology. No, not always, but most of the time, which is why St. Paul warns, “See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits, and not according to Christ” ([Col. 2:8](#)).

Stoicism cannot save. And neither can it sanctify. Both salvation and sanctification are the results of the atoning, redeeming, regenerating, and resurrecting work of Jesus and Jesus alone.

While Stoicism was the immediate context within which early Christianity flourished, nevertheless it was understood by the first centuries of Christians as the status quo of a pagan worldview. For this reason, the church rejected and repudiated it through the Gospel. So contrasts were at play with greater, higher truth than the common-sense truisms Stoicism wove into a philosophy of life, nay, a veritable religion of the self. In this way, Stoicism old and new manifests the same traits as the idol of our age — humanitarianism, the ethical underpinning of secular humanism. Yes, it offers peace, but Jesus grants not imperturbability from others, but reconciliation with *the* Other—God, and reconciliation with all others within the family of God:

[T]he Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid. You heard me say to you, ‘I am going away, and I will come to you.’ If you loved me, you would have rejoiced because I am going to the Father, for the Father is greater than I. And now I have told you before it takes place, so that when it does take place you may believe
([John 14.26-29](#)).

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The peace of Christ brings the Spirit of God and thereby connects us with things eternal, whereas Stoicism provides a few tools for this terrestrial life. Instead of self-mastery under one's own self-power, Jesus endows his people with the Holy Spirit who manifests the fruit of "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law" ([Gal. 5:22-23](#)). Indeed, not even the law of death or humanitarianism's presumption of annihilation can marshal anything that endures against the manifold gifts of God. For in them, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are self-giving for the present and eternal benefit of mankind.

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Preach the theology of Christ in which all theology is Christology, and leave life techniques to the Stoics.

Preach Christ because "it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him" ([Heb. 9:27-28](#)). Stoicism cannot save. And neither can it sanctify. Both salvation and sanctification are the results of the atoning, redeeming, regenerating, and resurrecting work of Jesus and Jesus alone. So preach Christ to those who may indeed benefit from the smatterings of truisms that Stoicism offers because, in life and certainly in death, "For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time ([1 Tim. 2:5-6](#)).

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