

THE TRAGEDY OF WALT WHITMAN

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John 17:20-23

Jesus Prays for All Believers

"I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me."

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You've undoubtedly heard the saying that one should "practice what you preach." Jesus, in His prayer for not only His present-day disciples, but also to all who would believe in their words, is though speaking of the believing on Christ, in Him. Well, you've also, I'm sure, have heard the saying "talk is cheap", right? Jesus said as much in quoting Isaiah speaking about the hypocritical scribes and Pharisees, saying, "These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men." (Matthew 15:8-9) The proper living what we believe is recorded by the Apostle John, Jesus said, "If you love Me, keep My commandments." (John 14:5) "He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him." (John 14:21) "If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love." (John 15:10) Jesus was saying, His commandments, not the tribal laws and ceremonial laws of the Old Testament or covenant that was with the Israelites. Jesus summed up the law and the prophets though in saying to love God with all that is in us and to love our neighbors as ourselves. (Mark 12:30-31) If we are saying we believe in Christ, we are then practicing what we preach in loving God and loving others!

The confusion has come into the church by that little word "believe". As Jesus promised, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved." (John 3:16-17) Now listen to this. John Maxwell, in his book called *Talent is Never Enough* he says, "Fred Smith, Sr., one of my mentors and the author of *Leading with Integrity*, says that a linguist with Wycliffe Bible translators told him that in twenty of the world's most primitive languages, the word for **belief** is the same as for **do**."

It is only as people became more sophisticated that they began to separate the meaning of one word from the other."¹

So going back to our beloved Words of Jesus in **John 3:16**, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever does in Him (how about abides in Him-John 15) should not perish but have everlasting life." How does that happen? That is accomplished by being born-again as Jesus put it, that is, being born of the Holy Spirit. (**John 3:3,5**) "But as many as **received** Him [that's literal], to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who **believe** in His name.

Some people make it quite known where they stand in their belief or unbelief in the gospel of Jesus Christ while others are as Jesus said, saying one thing and doing the opposite. Their believing wasn't matching up to their doing. Some, as we'll see from our example of the life and words of Walt Whitman, who was a prominent writer in the mid-1800s, he made it rather clear about what or of whom he believed in and it is what we'll call, "The Tragedy of Walt Whitman."

I'm not trying to dance on Walt Whitman's grave and I'm not intending to be just looking at the negative in this world. I had to write a paper for school on Walt Whitman and I've converted it into our message for today. It is relevant to us even today since his writings are still in print and just as we can learn from the ways of the Israelites, we can learn from Walt Whitman, as we compare his works with the Word of God.

Many people, including some of his contemporaries, have considered Walt Whitman's, *Leaves of Grass*, to be a masterpiece. Others though, were not that impressed. One person claimed it to be "just a barbaric yawp." After looking up the word yawp, I shook my head in agreement. At the heart of my disapproval of Walt Whitman's writings can be summed up in the words of Esther Lombardi, "Whitman seems to draw from the many roots of belief to form his own religion, putting himself at the center."² Why would I be so opposed to such a premise, as long as he isn't harming anyone? Holding on to my fundamental Christian beliefs, which are rooted in the Bible, I can't get past someone's disregard of the greatest revelation given to mankind, that is, the revelation of Jesus Christ, and instead would choose to focus on the creation over the Creator, and put one's self at the center of that creation versus honoring and glorifying the Supreme and Sovereign God of that creation.

The reason for me then, in why I am strongly opposed to, and in many cases have such a staunch repulsion to Walt Whitman, as well as

¹ John Maxwell, "Talent is Never Enough", pg. 25 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007)

² Esther Lombardi, "Walt Whitman: Spirituality and Religion in Whitman's Song of Myself", thoughtco.com. <https://www.thoughtco.com/spirituality-walt-whitmans-song-of-myself-735171> (accessed Mar. 21, 2023)

many others coming out of the transcendental movement, is that they steered many people, not only in their generation, but in others that followed, away from the ultimate Truth in Christ Jesus, our Savior and Lord. He spoke of his beliefs and I have spoken mine. In Whitman's own words from *Song of Myself*, "Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or am touch'd from, the scent of these arm-pits aroma finer than prayer, this head more than churches, bibles, and all the creeds." I contend, that those words fall into the category of blasphemy, according to the Word of God. To further add to what could be called at best, humanism, Whitman said, in the same aforementioned poem, "I have said that the soul is not more than the body, and I have said that the body is not more than the soul, and nothing, not God, is greater to one than one's self is..." Unfortunately for Walt Whitman, his beliefs were grounded on the temporal, as God's Word says, "the world is passing away, and the lust of it," (1 John 2:17) and it is only those who do the will of God that will live forever (even Jesus said so in Matthew 7:21).

So what was it about Walt Whitman's poems that garnered a place of esteem in American literature history? It is said that, while many fellow writers of his day did not appreciate Whitman's poetry, his poems were, at times, "intense, complex, and sexually explicit."³ Depending on the person then, I suppose that one of those three elements could lure someone into his tangled webs that he wove. As Whitman stated himself, he wrote more in line with common speech, with longer sentences and common vocabulary. He also claimed his writings to be more based on reality than morality. I suppose for anyone who has wrestled with, and never conquered, the Old English prose of Shakespeare, that would be refreshing indeed. For those that were titillated with any of Walt's sexual musings, they are also likely to have taken notice of the homoerotic tones of some of his poems. Honestly, I hadn't noticed, but I confess that I want to be as familiar with Walt Whitman's material about much as I do of William Shakespeare's stuff (hint: I primarily use a NEW King James Bible).

While I am not a psychiatrist, it could certainly be argued, with sufficient validation, including his own, that Walt Whitman was his biggest fan. Not only did he claim in his poem *Song of Myself* to "celebrate myself", but he also is said to publish reviews on his works under an assumed name and he co-authored his biography. Too bad Walt Whitman could not see the forest beyond his own tree and come to understand that, as James, the brother of Jesus stated, "friendship with the world is enmity with God" (**James 4:4**) and as Jesus proclaimed, that one can gain the whole world but then lose his own soul. (**Mark 8:36**)

3 Laurie E. Rozakis, Ph.D., Complete Idiot's Guide to American Literature, pg. 79 (Indianapolis: Alpha Books, 1999)

Sadly, Walt Whitman was not merely just appreciating God's creation or rejoicing in the life that God had given him on this earth. While Walt Whitman may have introduced new poetic forms and new ways to present poetry in American literature, which was outside of the standard rhythms and rhymes, his works have not gone with him, in bearing fruit for the glory of God. To borrow from Shakespeare, Walt Whitman had the whole world as his stage yet he chose to point to anything but the Lord, Christ Jesus. One can only hope that in his 19 years of illness and decline that he decided to pick up a Bible and turn to God for forgiveness and grace.

"that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation." (**Romans 10:9-10**)

One can be saying they are a Christian, use all of the Christian lingo, saying, "praise the Lord" and "amen" or "God is good" but if our lives aren't a testimony to others of Christ Jesus living in us then we are possibly on the same level as Walt Whitman, who put himself on the same level as God. I am not intending to beat up on new believers or judging anyone on where they are in Christ. God alone determines who are His or not. I am though encouraging us all to continue to call on Jesus, to look to Jesus, who is the author and finisher of our faith. May you be blessed and encouraged today in the Words of Jesus, saying to you, "All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father. Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him. Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." (**Matthew 11:27-29**)

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