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John 8:51

⁵¹ I tell you the truth, anyone who obeys my teaching will never die!"

Matthew 7:7–8

⁷ "Keep on asking, and you will receive what you ask for. Keep on seeking, and you will find. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened to you. ⁸ For everyone who asks, receives. Everyone who seeks, finds. And to everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.

Modern Gnostics and our simple faith.

When I was in graduate school many years ago, I had a friend who was vehemently anti-Christian. He used to argue with me. I was raised Roman Catholic and since he was from Greece, he was raised Greek Orthodox. His opinions were common among young people at the time – and they are common among **all** Americans today.

My friend would say that Christianity was shallow, that it was silly. Accept Jesus as your savior, and you will live forever in Heaven with God. No educated person could go for that, he said. I would tell him that faith was indeed very simple. That is why I liked it. God wasn't asking us to be anything more than we are – imperfect creatures who make a lot of mistakes. We aren't even told that

we have to do a pile of good things. We're simply told that if we do believe in Jesus Christ, we will naturally end up doing good things – because, like Jesus, we will accept all people as children of God.

The summer before my last year of grad school, when I was finishing up my Ph.D. training, my friend went back home to Greece for the summer. He was a handsome, kindly guy, and he was charismatic. When he came back in late August, he was tanned and muscled. I told him that he looked really good. He told me that he had spent the summer working and working out. About two months into the semester, he developed a cough. It got worse and worse, and a number of us told him to go to the student health center. He had cancer in his lungs, and that it had metastasized from his testicles. He quickly lost weight as he went through chemotherapy. We took turns giving him rides to his treatments. He fought it. He insisted that he would be healed, and he would survive.

At one point, while my friend was undergoing chemo, we talked about the four Gospels. He asked me why three of them were called the synoptic Gospels. I told him that the word synoptic is from a Greek word that means synopsis or summary – but certainly, he knew that better than me. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are often called Synoptic because they give very similar

summaries of Jesus Christ's life. This is in comparison with the Gospel of John, which is very different in content and form.

I'll get back to my Greek friend. But indeed, there is great overlap in content between Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and this has drawn a lot of attention from Bible scholars over the centuries. It's more than that they tell similar stories about Jesus' life, which we would expect. It's that they often contain extremely similar wording. Careful analysis of the three Gospels has led scholars to believe that Mark was written first, and that Matthew and Luke had copies of it when they wrote their Gospels.

Matthew and Luke contain more material than Mark. When Matthew and Luke do contain the same material as Mark, which is frequent, that material is usually presented in the same sequence as in Mark. When they contain material that orders events differently, usually this material is not found in Mark. There is also material that is in Matthew and Luke, but is not in Mark. This has led people to conclude that Matthew and Luke both had Mark, as well as a lost Gospel. It is this missing Gospel, that we call Q, that has drawn a lot of interest. It would account for the fact that Mathew and Luke contain material that is not in Mark but appears in almost identical form in both Matthew and Luke.

Some people have suggested that Q might have not been written as a narrative, like the Gospels we have in the Bible, but rather, that it consisted simply of a series of sayings of Jesus. There is a Gospel in existence that has this property, but it's not in the Bible. It's called the Gospel of Thomas. Fragments of it were referenced in many ancient documents, so it was known to exist, but the entire Gospel wasn't discovered until 1945. We don't think it is this missing Gospel Q, however. The Gospel of Thomas was written about a hundred years after the four Gospels that are in the Bible were written, and so it couldn't have been used as a reference in the writing of those Gospels. Also, since the Gospel of Thomas was not chosen to be in the official Bible, it is considered "non-canonical". The "canon" is another word for the official Bible.

As it turns out, the Bible was assembled in stages, with the Old Testament finalized around the year 250 A.D., with the exception of the books that are collectively called the Apocrypha by most Protestants. The New Testament was finalized around the year 400 A.D. It was a tough job: there were many writings that were thought to be authentic in some sense, and various councils had to agree on standards that would be used to judge books.

These were the standards that were used: 1) Was the author an apostle or someone with a close connection to an apostle? 2) Was the book in wide use in

the early days of Christianity? 3) Did the book agree with accepted Christian doctrine? 4) Were the contents of the book accurate? These were fuzzy criteria, of course, and it was hard to know what to include and what to exclude.

There must have been other documents that would have met these standards but didn't survive. This would include other letters written by Paul the evangelist. The missing Gospel Q might have been another one. Other writings that we believe were used as references by Matthew and Luke might have been chosen as part of the canon if they had survived.

But getting back to the Gospel of Thomas. It was written at least a hundred years after the life of Jesus and so is not considered authentic. It also did not meet the third standard that I listed. It went against accepted Christian doctrine – and that is why I want to talk about it.

Consider our first passage today: **John 8:51**: *I tell you the truth, anyone who obeys my teaching will never die!*" Here is a quote from the Gospel of Thomas, which purports to be a collection of statements made by Jesus: *And he said, "Whoever finds the interpretation of these sayings will not taste death."*

In the passage from the real Gospel, the Gospel of John, Jesus says that whoever lives by his teachings will live forever with God. The quote from the

Gospel of Thomas, the non-canonical Gospel, says that whoever can figure out ***the meaning*** of what Jesus said will live forever with God.

Now consider our second quote, **Matthew 7:7–8**: *“Keep on asking, and you will receive what you ask for. Keep on seeking, and you will find. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened to you. ⁸ For everyone who asks, receives. Everyone who seeks, finds. And to everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.* Here is a passage from the Gospel of Thomas: *Jesus said, “Let him who seeks continue seeking until he finds. When he finds, he will become troubled. When he becomes troubled, he will be astonished, and he will rule over the All.”*

In the passage from the real Gospel, we are told that we should keep seeking, keep knocking. We will find what we are looking for, and the door will be opened. To understand this passage, we have to understand that in the Bible, seeking usually means praying, and knocking was a Jewish expression for prayer. Prayer is thus a quest, not simply a wish list dumped on God. The passage thus says that continuous praying will lead to a true relationship with God. The passage from the non-canonical Gospel says that by seeking, by praying, we will find something troubling – and then we will rule over all other people. This is very un-Christian, to try to use our faith as a way to elevate ourselves above others.

The passages from the non-canonical gospel superficially resemble passages from the real Bible. But together, what these passages from the Gospel of Thomas say is that there is some deep, complex secret that needs to be figured out, and once we do so, we will live forever and take a place above other people.

What this smacks of - and what other non-canonical writings that were rejected by the people who assembled the Bible smack of - is something called Gnosticism. It's a very general term that refers to a broad set of religious movements that flourished from the second to the fourth centuries A.D. They all purported to offer salvation, that is, life with God forever, via some special knowledge. That's where that word Gnostic comes from: knowledge. Gnostics believed that they could find some deep, magical intellectual enlightenment in the teachings of Jesus that was not attainable by regular Christians – and that only they would be saved. They would triumph for eternity.

But I've forgotten all about my friend in grad school, the guy who developed cancer. As the months wore on, he stayed in school and fought to maintain a normal life. He turned out to be extremely tough. He lost weight. He lost his hair. He lost energy. But he stayed in class and he came to the Computer Science building almost every day. Once, I told him that I envied him because he could read Greek: he could more easily learn to read the original New Testament

scriptures than I could. He laughed that off, but not in a conceited way. He simply thought that the New Testament was full of ridiculous fake miracles, with a guy walking on water, curing the blind, and bringing back the dead. He said that the thing that would cure him was chemotherapy, not praying to God.

He asked me if I thought that prayer would cure him. I told him no, not necessarily. God does not cure everyone who prays for healing. We don't know why God does what he does, why some people are cured and some die. There are things we are not meant to understand, I told him. I figured he would laugh at this. Imagine, a faith that admitted to intellectual limitations.

But my friend didn't laugh. He said that he wished he believed in God, that it would have been a great comfort. I told him that in fact, I thought that maybe he did believe. That's why he talked about Christianity so much, I suggested. The problem, I said, was that simple Christian faith was politically incorrect among highly educated people, and so he didn't know what to do. He believed, but he didn't want others to think he was a fool. I remember him nodding at this and then closing his eyes to rest for a bit. He slumped back in his chair in the computer lab at USC, where we were students. He napped.

This attitude that my friend had, that Christianity is simplistic and ignorant, and not suitable for educated or smart people, isn't a new thing. It wasn't born in

the 1960's. It goes all the way back to the century after Jesus lived. There were people who wanted to believe, who wanted to be Christians, but they felt the need to make something deep and magical out of it. They wanted there to be an intellectual challenge in it, something that if they could discover it, they would be saved. They wanted eternal life with God to be reserved for truly gifted people who could figure out the secrets hidden in Jesus' teachings. They never even articulated just what this knowledge was. It had something to do with seeing that material things, physical things, are inherently evil, that sin doesn't consist of doing wrong things, that it consists of ignorance, the lack of knowledge. Their logic was tangled. They simply wanted to feel superior, and so they tried to twist Jesus' teachings into something that would make them better than other people.

My friend did not survive. He died months after being diagnosed. Some fellow grad students put together a Greek orthodox funeral. His parents came over for it. I believe that in the end, my friend believed. He was no Gnostic.

And we are not Gnostics. We see the teachings of Jesus as easily understandable by all people. There is nothing deep or magical in them. We are to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind. We are to love our neighbor. We are to accept Jesus as God and savior. Our God makes it easy for us. That is why our faith is so magnificent.