

What We Must Take on Faith

Dicken's classic "A Christmas Carol," and the movie classic, "It's a Wonderful Life," are both Christmas-time favorites. Interestingly, their strikingly contrasting story lines promulgate a similar lesson.

Dicken's Scrooge is curmudgeonly, self-justified, blind and impervious to the harmful effects of his cruel, unsympathetic ways. Only after visitations from the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Future – and repeated confrontation with the terrible consequences of his behavior – does he finally see the error of his ways and undergo redemptive transformation.

By contrast, George, the Jimmy Stewart character in "It's a Wonderful Life," is disconsolate -- down on his luck, facing failure, and contemplating suicide. Only after an angel visitation that discloses his numerous contributions to others in his community is he persuaded to return home, whereupon he encounters the support of that community and his own life prospects are restored..

What's the lesson here? Too simply put, what we do makes a difference. Without the fantastic elements in these stories, however, neither Scrooge nor George would have gotten the message! From a Christian perspective, what fantasy reveals (in these stories) must be taken on faith. We'll never know the full ramification of our lives and actions. By all appearances we may be successful, or we may look and feel like failures. But that hardly settles the question of the ultimate outcome of our lives.

Some Christians maintain, "We are not called to be successful, but to be faithful." While this can be a form of self-justification by those who have failed, or are perversely unyielding in their commitments, it contains a kernel of truth. The truth is that one cannot necessarily count on adherence to the good, the true, or the beautiful to yield tangible, visible rewards. Nor can one count on being recognized and rewarded for one's efforts to do the good or the right. Indeed, one may not even know when one is on the side of the angels, and when one is not.

I have now lived long enough that I can no longer say, "If I had my own life to live over again, there is nothing I would change." There are lots of things I would change! But in the end I don't know what difference would be made. So I take it on faith that goodness, truth, and beauty remain worthy pursuits, that whatever adheres to these will endure, and that whatever does not will perish.

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