

The most powerful essay I've ever read

I'd like to begin 2019 in an unusual way by summarizing the most powerful single essay I have ever read. It is by C. S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity*, and it deals with the very heart of the Christian life.

According to Lewis, before we become Christians, we each take as our starting point our ordinary self with its various desires and interests. When we become followers of Christ, we know that we will need to give up some of these desires and interests and add others in their place. We will have to go to church, read our Bibles, pray, give, serve, and so on.

But we are hoping that when all the demands of our religion have been met, we will still have the chance to get on with our own lives and do as we like. We are like an honest man who pays his taxes but hopes there will be money left over for him to spend as he wishes.

However, this is not the way of Christ at all.

A thornbush cannot produce figs.

To quote Lewis: "Christ says, 'Give me All. I don't want so much of your time and so much of your money and so much of your work: I want You. I have not come to torment your natural self, but to kill it. No half-measures are any good. I don't want to cut off a branch here and a branch there, I want to have the whole tree down. Hand over the whole natural self, all the desires which you think innocent as well as the ones you think wicked—the whole outfit. I will give you a new self instead. In fact, I will give you Myself; my own will shall become yours.'"

As Lewis notes, this way is far harder, and far easier. It is so hard to hand over our entire lives to Jesus—*all* our time, our money, our abilities, our ambitions. Not just part of them so we can live as we like—all of them.

And yet it is easier as well.

Take, as an example, two boys given a problem in mathematics. The lazy boy will memorize the formula because that's easier for the moment. The other will learn the principle, even though that's harder at the time. But when the test comes, the lazy boy is working much harder over things the other boy understands and enjoys.

According to Lewis, it's like that here. The almost impossible thing is to hand over your whole self to Jesus. But it is far easier than what we are trying to do instead. We are trying to remain what we call "ourselves," to keep our personal happiness as our great aim in life, yet at the same time be good Christians.

This is exactly what Jesus warned us we could not do. As he said, a thornbush cannot produce figs. Grass cannot make wheat. If I want to produce wheat, the change must go deeper than the surface. I must be plowed up and resown. My whole life must belong to God.

“This is the whole of Christianity.”

Lewis says that this is why the real problem of Christianity comes where we do not usually look for it: at the very moment we wake up in the morning.

All our wishes and hopes for the day rush at us like wild animals. And the first job each morning consists simply in shoving them all back—in listening to that other voice, taking that other point of view, letting the other larger, stronger, quieter life of Jesus come flowing in. And so on, all day. Standing back from all our natural hopes and desires—coming in out of the wind—listening to Jesus.

We can only do it for moments at first. But from these moments a new life begins to spread through our system. Now we are letting Jesus work at our souls. It is the difference between paint, which is merely laid on the surface, and a dye or stain which soaks right through.

Jesus never talked in vague, idealistic terms. When he said, “Be perfect,” he meant it. He meant that we must go in for the full treatment. It is hard; but the sort of compromise we are trying to make is harder—in fact, it is impossible.

It may be hard for an egg to turn into a bird; it would be even harder for it to learn to fly while remaining an egg. We are like eggs at present. And you cannot go on indefinitely being just an ordinary, decent egg. You must be hatched or go bad.

Lewis concludes: "This is the whole of Christianity. There is nothing else."

What will your egg become this year?