

Jesus and Fromm: A Discerning Look

Sometimes Fromm is “spot-on” and emphasizes ideas Jesus would wholeheartedly endorse. Sometimes Fromm strays rather far from a biblical perspective. Let's take a discerning look at Jesus and Fromm and see where they agree and where they don't.

Where Do Jesus and Fromm Agree?

On several issues the two are on the same page:

- Each called attention to our alienation from each other, and each affirmed our need to belong to a community.
- Both taught that we all struggle with fear and develop methods (defenses) to avoid experiencing it.
- Each spoke about conflict with authority; each was aware that we struggle for independence from external authorities, including God.
- Both affirmed the existence of false guilt, and both worked to eliminate it.
- Each emphasized freedom and taught that we must not be slaves to the wishes and values of the people around us. (Note Galatians 1:10 which refers to “striving to please men,” 1 Corinthians 7:23 which tells us “do not become slaves of men,” and 1 Corinthians 10:29 which asks “...why is my freedom judged by another's conscience?”)
- Both described the importance of living authentically without hypocritical masks.
- Each recognized that we must choose between life and death. Fromm wrote that two traits, loving death and loving life, operate in every person. Jesus would agree. (See Deuteronomy 30:19 “...I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live....”)

Where Do Jesus and Fromm Differ?

They contradict each other on number of crucial points:

- CONSCIENCE: Repeating Adam and Eve's arrogance, Fromm wrote that we “need neither revelation nor the authority of the church to know good and evil.” (Man for Himself, pp. 5-6) Instead, he believed that we can trust our conscience to select what is right and what is wrong. Fromm saw the mature (“humanistic”) conscience as the voice of our true selves, a voice we can trust to guide us without error as we choose our own ethics. The bible teaches that conscience has been distorted by the Fall and must be redeemed by Christ. While conscience may at times be good or pure (1 Timothy 1:5, 3:9; Hebrews 13:18), conscience may also be weak, “seared” and insensitive to truth, evil, and in need of cleansing (1 Corinthians 8:7, 1 Timothy 4:2, Hebrews 10:22, Hebrews 9:14)
- GOD: Fromm believed that a commitment to God stemmed from neurotic dependency and fear. To him, depending on God always led to feelings of helplessness and worthlessness. To Jesus our need of God was simply a statement of fact; it never implied worthlessness.
- GUILT: Fromm recognized no objective guilt, only feelings of guilt that occur when we violate a standard internalized from our parents. To Jesus, guilt is more than feelings; it results from a real violation of God's real standards. Jesus remedies guilt by paying the price for our failure to meet God's standards. Fromm remedies guilt by replacing every external standard (including God's) with our own standards.

- **HUMAN NATURE:** To Fromm man is basically good but has been perverted by an insane society. To Jesus man is born sinful and needs God’s forgiveness. In line with his belief in man’s inherent goodness, Fromm finds both human reason and human conscience to be trustworthy – indeed infallible – guides. Titus 1:15 refers to defilement of both mind and conscience. There is no way either reason or conscience can be our infallible guide.
- **HUMAN NEEDS:** Fromm believed that our most basic need is to shed our masks and be fully ourselves. Jesus, while agreeing that we need to shed our masks, knows that we need His gift of a new self before we can live openly without shame.
- **MOTIVATION:** Fromm proposed that our fear of being alone and helpless motivates us to escape from the freedom of being responsible for ourselves. While that is true, 2 Corinthians 5:14 gives us another, better control over our motives: the love of Jesus.
- **REBELLION:** Jesus and Fromm held starkly opposite views about rebelling against God’s authority. Fromm lauded Adam’s rebellion as the first step to human freedom – a major step forward for mankind. (See Erich Fromm, *Ye Shall Be As Gods*, p, 23). Jesus knew the truth: Adam’s rebellion put us in slavery, a slavery to sin. Jesus said that “everyone – including Adam – who commits sin is the slave of sin.” (John 8:34) And freedom from slavery? Jesus bought that with His death. Real freedom comes not from rebellion against God but from submission to Him. (Galatians 5:1 “It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.”) Fromm also encouraged resisting human authority. (He called this resistance “autonomy.”) Jesus disagreed. He resisted human authority only when it contradicted His submission to the authority of His Father.
- **SOCIETY:** Like Karl Marx, Fromm believed that a capitalistic society alienates us from each other by promoting competition (rather than the love and unity we need), He also believed that society alienates us from ourselves by forcing us to repress socially unacceptable thoughts and feelings. Jesus lived free of society’s pressures to compete and conform. He showed us how to love each other while living in the midst of a corrupt society.
- **THERAPY:** For Fromm the ability to change and the responsibility for change lie within each person. His therapeutic goal was to help a client gain autonomy from others and become their authentic selves. This means that (1) they trust their inner voice and use their reason to form their own ethics, (2) they drop their hypocritical conformity to society, (3) they stop trying to escape from the responsibilities of freedom, (4) they move beyond their alienation from self and others, and (5) they become the good, productive, loving persons that they inherently are. In contrast, Jesus’ goal is to heal our alienation from God. His healing creates for us a new, glorious self; gives us the power to lovingly connect with others; ends our warfare with God; and gifts us with the Holy Spirit who will tell us who we are, who God is, and what is truly ethical.

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