



# *Good is not Good Enough*

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## **Being a good person**

It seems to be a common philosophy...Believe in God, be good, go to Heaven. Even some Christians who know salvation is God's free gift, not merited by good deeds, still maintain the idea Christianity is fulfilled by being a good person. But nobody can really define what is good.

Mark 10:17-22 tells the story of an encounter between Jesus and a rich man. The man came to Jesus and asked, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus could have answered the man's question about eternal life and left it at that, but He didn't. Jesus typically engaged with people in a way to force them into self-reflection concerning what is in their heart. He often challenged their pre-conceived notions about God, righteousness and the Kingdom of Heaven. In this encounter Jesus challenges the rich man, and us, to scrutinize why someone is considered good.

We call a child good when they are generally well-behaved. They don't have to be good all the time. An occasional temper-tantrum or disobedience is almost expected. We still call a person good even if their goodness only applies to friends and people they like. There is no requirement to be good to enemies or sinners. We say someone is a good Catholic when we see them going to church regularly and being religious. Of course, we don't know what they do when we aren't looking.

The point is...when we say someone is good, what we really mean to say is they are good enough, mostly good or they appear to be good.

When it comes to self-assessment, most people consider themselves to be a good person. Having healthy self-esteem means being confident in one's morality and self-worth. It follows that self-judgment tends to flex towards self-justification and feeling good about oneself. In order to accomplish this, certain faults or habits are downplayed or ignored. As with all things considered good, when one says "I am a good person" what they are really saying is "I am good enough, I am mostly good or I appear good."

Being called good means living up to prevailing cultural or personal standards. To be a good person by society's standards, one simply needs to be nice, helpful and not harm others. Certain actions such as murder and human trafficking automatically disqualify a person from being considered good. Actions which don't directly harm another person aren't included in society's standards of goodness. Each individual decides for themselves which of these must be avoided to maintain status of being a good person. Envy, jealousy, selfishness, drunkenness, sexuality and other works of the flesh listed in Galatians 5:19-21 may keep one from inheriting the Kingdom of God, but don't necessarily preclude a person from perceiving themselves as good.

Goodness isn't a flip of a coin, heads or tails, bad or good. Good is scale like a thermometer where anyone can set the goodness level to their comfort. One can always call themselves good by comparison to someone else. Pretty much, the entire world could be considered good when compared to dictators who have waged war leading to destruction and death. However, justifying one's goodness by comparison to someone else doesn't make a person good. The Church teaches "What appears good only in comparison with evil would not be truly good. The most excellent good is something even better than what is admitted to be good" (Catechism, 1620).

"No one is good but God alone" was the second part of Jesus' response to the rich man. Jesus gave the man a new standard to consider, God's standard. Based on God's standard of goodness "there is no one who does good, not even one" (Psalm 14:3) and "there is no one on earth who is righteous, no one who does what is right and never sins" (Ecclesiastes 7:20).



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We all have to face facts. We aren't as good we think we are. "Every man's way is right in his own eyes, but the Lord weighs the hearts" (Proverbs 21:2).

## **Natural goodness**

It isn't too difficult to be good, or at least good enough. One simply must choose to be good and follow their conscience. "Let your conscience be your guide" is an old saying. Conscience always guides to the good. When one does something wrong, they might get a "guilty conscience". What the world calls "conscience", the Church calls the Natural Moral Law.

"Man participates in the wisdom and goodness of the Creator who gives him mastery over his acts and the ability to govern himself with a view to the true and the good. The natural law is nothing other than the light of understanding placed in us by God; through it we know what we must do and what we must avoid. God has given this light or law at the creation. The natural law, present in the heart of each man and established by reason, is universal in its precepts and its authority extends to all men." (Catechism, 1954-1956)

This Natural Moral Law gives every person a natural disposition towards goodness. Anyone can be good, because natural goodness doesn't require one to be Christian or even believe in God. Thus, even atheists can be good people and make moral choices.

Natural goodness is given by God to lead mankind to the revelation there is a higher good, a good which can't be obtained through human effort. When one attains goodness as far as natural goodness can take them and realizes "No one is good but God alone", they should become inspired to seek God and the ultimate goodness only He can bring.

The topic of Natural goodness leads me to digress for a moment with a related a topic...

The question is sometimes asked, "Why does God permit evil in the world?" The answer begins with God wanting each person to freely follow the natural goodness in their heart and then follow Him to seek the ultimate good. The entire point of living in this world hinges on the ability to make a free choice to return to God or to reject Him. Since the natural law is not perceived clearly by everyone, some choose evil over good. If God forced the world to be good there would be no free choice and no reason to be born into the world. It is unfortunate, but sometimes good people suffer collateral damage. But we are in the world and in the battle, not of the world.

There's a place where God protects us from evil and suffering, the Kingdom of Heaven. There, "He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there shall be no more death or mourning, wailing or pain" (Revelation 21:4). If God wiped away all pain and tears in this world, there would be little reason to look forward to the Kingdom of Heaven. In the Kingdom of Heaven, all are united to God and reflect His perfect goodness. To be able to see evil and suffering in the world and pray for the world's conversion without being dragged down by it (even if personally affected by it) is to truly embrace one's eternal home in the Kingdom of God.

Back to our regularly scheduled program...

Any Christian who decides Christianity is about being a good person and doesn't seek the higher good falls short in two respects. From a personal perspective, they can never reach the full abundant life Jesus has for them. Everlasting peace and joy cannot spring forth from within someone who hasn't fully given themselves to Jesus. They are like Peter, stepping out of the boat and onto the water only to begin to sink because their sight isn't fixed on Jesus (Matthew 14:30). From a discipleship perspective, Christians who are simply good people are no different and no better than the rest of the world. They can't shine their light before others because their light is just as



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dim as everyone else's. They have nothing in their life to inspire the atheist to say "They've got something I want!" Instead, the atheist may say "See, I am just as good as they are even without God."

For all the reasons above, being a good person doesn't merit favor with God and isn't a punched ticket into Heaven. The Kingdom of Heaven is inherited only by those who do the will of the Father (Matthew 7:21), not by those who will stand before God and remind Him how many good deeds they did.

The rich man called Jesus good, but he saw a lot more in Jesus than mere goodness. Jesus didn't draw crowds because he was just another good person. People saw something different in Him. There was meekness, patience, kindness, generosity, understanding and much more. Common definitions of a good person seldom include these qualities. These are virtues. These are the greater good. And these can only be perfected through holiness and union with God, the source of all that is good.

## **The need for virtues**

"A virtue is an habitual and firm disposition to do the good. It allows the person not only to perform good acts, but to give the best of himself. The virtuous person tends toward the good with all his sensory and spiritual powers; he pursues the good and chooses it in concrete actions. The goal of a virtuous life is to become like God" (Catechism 1803).

One of the reasons goodness fails is there is no higher goal to it. The goal of goodness is simply to be good for the sake of being good or the notion goodness will merit favor with God. Virtue isn't desired for the sake of itself. Virtue is desired for the higher goal of becoming like God. Although virtue is hard to perfect because of human weakness, virtue never stops seeking perfection.

Goodness can fail when virtue isn't applied to the situation in order to alter its outcome. There are times when goodness in the heart tells us what we must do but doesn't give us the strength to do it. The heart says success comes through planning, yet lack of prudence leads to carelessness and lack of forethought. The heart says all people have dignity, yet lack of justice leads to depriving others of their due. The heart says not all things are easy and perseverance is needed, yet lack of fortitude leads to giving up. The heart says "all things in moderation", yet lack of temperance leads to over-indulgence.

The greatest reason goodness fails is it relies on human effort, which is weak and imperfect. God's grace and the Holy Spirit are needed to overcome human weakness. Jesus said, "Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing" (John 15:4-5). One cannot become a better person simply by trying harder. Consider paragraph 1087 from the Diary of Saint Faustina:

"When one day I resolved to practice a certain virtue, I lapsed into the vice opposed to that virtue ten times more frequently than on other days. In the evening, I was reflecting on why, today, I had lapsed so extraordinarily, and I heard the words: You were counting too much on yourself and too little on Me. And I understood the cause of my lapses."

## **Holiness and virtues**

Holiness opens the door to virtues and a virtuous life. Holiness leads to virtue and virtue drives holiness. These work together and cannot be separated. Neither holiness nor virtue seeks to exalt human morality. Rather, they



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both aim for the goal of being in the likeness of God. To this goal holiness also seeks union with God, so as to be set apart to accomplish God's purpose and God's purpose alone.

The first step in holiness is desire for God alone. The second step is humility in understanding one can never be good enough to attain God on their own. Holiness reveals the extent of human limitations. It uncovers every weakness and sin which leads a person to say "I am not a good person, but by God's grace I am being transformed." It brings to light salvation and virtue are both merciful gifts, not personal achievements.

Yet, the realization of one's own wretchedness, so to speak, doesn't reduce self-esteem because holiness recognizes all dignity and worth comes from God. Thus, even in weakness, frailty and sin one is confident their soul has immeasurable worth to God. Misses in virtue are accepted as being a part of the human experience, but not tolerated as an ongoing integral part of one's being.

Holiness and virtue go far beyond being good. Every step taken in holiness leads us closer to union with God and transformation into His likeness. Living in holiness is living in virtue. And living in virtue means being better than good because good isn't the goal, God is the goal.