

NEVER TRY TO BE GOOD (NOT EVER AGAIN)

Wanting to be good – trying to be good – is one of the major disconnects between thousands of people who want to be Christians, but the true joy and relationship with God eludes them. That is, the Christian Life which they long for and want so much to be part of is not possible for them because they are still trying to be good and do good.

It is my hope this morning to persuade each and every one of you to make a vow, as I did some years ago, that you will never ever try to be good – not ever again. Of course, I will fail in this purpose. That is, not all of you will make this vow. But if even three or four of you do, it will be worth it – it will be worth all the misunderstandings and miscommunication that are likely to occur. First of all, let me assure you that I am quite serious. This is not about some trick definition of “good” or “goodness.” Trying to be good is the enemy of the Christian Life. When we try to be good, it puts a tool in Satan’s hand that subtly but inevitably leads us into Satan’s kingdom rather than into God’s Kingdom.

We will come at this from several angles: personal experience, Jesus’ teachings, the principles at work behind the scenes, and the contrast between trying to be good and *actually following* Jesus. I will start off with a few personal comments that you can easily discount if you want to. Then when you are comfortable, we will go on to things not easily discounted.

Is it really the purpose of the church to help good people to be gooder? If all the good people would try a little harder, give a little more, or care a little more earnestly, we could solve a lot of our problems. This kind of thinking is, most of you realize, one of my major complaints against the liberal Christendom of our time. If you go into most of the liberal churches today, the sermon is essentially saying that we should all be kinder, more loving, more thoughtful, more generous. And the implication, whether subtle or spoken boldly, is that if we would all just try a little harder in these ways, we could make the world a better place. “You can make a difference” is one of the slogans.

Nobody means to lie, but that is a lie. Evil is a tougher customer than that. Jesus is not crucified for telling people to be good; that would have fit in just fine with the religion of His time. Jesus is crucified for telling people that the way they are going at it is hopeless. It will dead-end and leave them in Hell – that is, alone and without hope. Relationship with God lies in an entirely different WAY – it is a different Covenant entirely. They must be born anew, born of the Spirit – they must start all over again, on an entirely different basis and on a very different Path.

Jesus is astounding, incredible, and very different. For generations now we have been trying to tame it down, dilute it, make it fit better into our usual ways of thinking and believing. We don't want to offend anybody or pretend that one way is better than any other. So we keep trying to find a "new wine" that will not burst the old wineskins. But all we get is wine so watered down that it makes no real difference to who we are or how we live.

One more comment while I am in this diatribe. All around me I see and encounter people who are frenetic; people who are struggling with schedules they cannot keep up with; people with distractions on every hand; people with technological gadgets and inventions that keep morphing into even better tools faster than they can learn how to use the old ones. And the church comes into this utter mayhem with the brilliant message that we should all "Do more. Try harder. Love more people. Do more good. Care more. Save the world from evil." And behind that is the unspoken but very real message: "You are not enough. You are not doing enough. You don't really love God or your neighbor, or things wouldn't be the way they are. You are not really a true Christian."

It is startling to realize that this was already a problem in the much simpler world of Jesus' time. Jesus was reducing the obligations of Torah to the much more authentic levels of personal and relational principles. In all of Jesus' teachings and parables, love is about a *real* neighbor – somebody you can touch and see and know. If love goes generic, it loses all power to transform anything or anyone. The Omnipotent God is beyond our comprehension. And this God can care about billions of people, one-on-one, and all the time. But we cannot. In this limited physical realm, we are back to one-on-one, or we are just playing make-believe games.

Some of us know what it takes to raise a child or two. Mariana and I have two children in their mid-fifties, and it still isn't over – the caring and the love that we pour into them. Do you know what it means to be a really good friend to someone? But I can send a few bucks to Uganda and save somebody's ass or their soul from seven thousand miles away without even meeting them? And why Uganda? Why not Cambodia or Sierra Leone or Chicago? People are trying to be good by playing make-believe games all over the landscape. Doesn't anybody you can see need you? Do we ever want to love somebody we can have an actual relationship with?

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

I do understand that you cannot fully relate to my personal experiences any more than I can fully understand yours. Nevertheless, sharing our personal experiences helps us to keep authentic and grounded.

I grew up in a very conscientiously religious family. My parents had both studied at Butler University in Indianapolis to become Ministers. I was named after their Greek Professor, Bruce Kirchner. None of this was part of my awareness when I was young. My first major spiritual awakening – the one that sent me into the Ministry – occurred the summer of my sixth-grade year. I am grateful for that experience to this day. It certainly affirmed and furthered my awareness of the presence of the Holy Spirit, but it did not break me out of “the Law,” as we call it. In fact it made me even more determined to be good and to do good. It did not occur to me that God would accept me, help me, or even put up with me if I did not try to be good and try to do more and more good all the time. As far as I knew, that was what religion was all about. In the language of Jesus' time and Paul's, I was a Pharisee of the Pharisees.

Twelve years later, two-thirds of the way through Seminary, I ran into Jesus for the first time. I knew the name; I had been studying His life and teachings, of course. But I still thought it was all about being good and doing good. And I was trying as hard as I knew how. Toward the end of a Clinical Pastoral program the summer of my second year at Andover Newton Theological School, we were in a worship service that ended with communion. The Head Chaplain was Lutheran, so the communion included real wine. I let it go by. I did not drink (yet); drinking anything alcoholic was against my code of being right and good. I guess it made Jesus pretty annoyed that my little rule was

more important to me than His communion meal or the fellowship of those who had worked together and shared so much through that long, hot summer. Later that night, when I was at my prayers, Jesus asked me why I had refused His communion. I told Him what I knew He already knew – that I did not drink. We argued for a while, and then the connection between us blinked out. I guess it was because I was not listening very well – I was not being humble and teachable.

That loss of connection was new for me. I had never realized how much help, support, and guidance I was receiving all the time – day in and day out. Suddenly all life was bleak beyond words to describe it. I could barely breathe. I could go through the motions – eat and walk and talk – but it was all utterly pointless, completely devoid of all meaning or purpose.

About the end of the third day, I gave up. I said, “Look, I don’t know what I did that was so bad, but I can’t go on this way. I will smoke, drink, do anything You say, but please don’t leave me alone anymore.” Instantly it was like somebody turned the light switch back on. I was flooded with the Presence – with caring and love and well-being – beyond anything I had ever known before. I was already married and I loved Mariana with passion and devotion, but that was nothing in comparison to what I felt toward her now. And I saw her in her own identity, and knew that she was far more important in her own right than I had ever realized before. Everywhere I turned, everyone I thought about came into this same amazing light. Though I had tried to be good and do good, it was clear to me that I had never truly or deeply loved anybody – not like I did now. It was not *my* love, of course. It was being given to me.

It was much bigger than I can put into words, but that will have to do. At the end, when the dust had settled and I had been assured that I would not be abandoned again – not unless I tried to go back to being a “Law man” – I made a vow, a solemn promise to my Lord: I swore that I would never try to be good – not ever again. Some of you know how very well I have kept that vow.

WHAT ABOUT JESUS’ STORY, AND HIS TEACHINGS?

Let us start out by asking: “Who killed Jesus?” Was it the tax-collectors or the prostitutes? Was it the thieves or the criminals – the dregs of society? No. Very clearly it was the scribes and the Pharisees, the Priests, the Sanhedrin – the best and most religious members of

Jewish society and religion at that time. It was the people focused on being good, doing right, living by Torah. Jesus was challenging their truth, their Way of Life, their certainty about what God was like and what God wanted – until they could not stand it or abide it. Jesus’ teachings scalded them, and Jesus’ growing influence threatened them so badly that they decided it was necessary to get rid of Him. They also convinced themselves that Jesus’ movement might start a riot that would bring Roman soldiers down on their heads.

But our real question is: “Was Jesus aware of the issue between His Gospel and the cult of goodness?” Never mind one little proof-text; Jesus’ awareness of this issue permeates the entire New Testament story. Start with the parable of the Prodigal Son. (Luke 15:11-32) Of course, our title for this parable shows how determined we are to miss the point. The Prodigal Son is not the problem. The Prodigal has made serious mistakes and he has repented, and the Waiting Father is delighted to welcome him back. We identify and we love it, and we hope that the Prodigal Son will “be good” from now on. We even tell the story that way and try to claim that being good is the point of the story. But the real drama is about the Elder Brother. The Elder Brother has been busy being good all his life. Therefore he has no love or forgiveness for his brother. It is the Elder Brother – the Pharisee – who is the enemy of Jesus’ Gospel. It is his goodness that keeps him from valuing his brother or his father (God) or the farm (the Kingdom). Spiritually speaking, the Elder Brother is a miserable, stingy, close-fisted, tight-hearted emblem of that which is against everything Jesus stands for and cares about. In theory, the Elder Brother can repent; he can change – become part of the true family for the first time. But the parable does not give us any hint about whether or not this will happen. That is because Jesus is telling the parable for us Elder Brother types, and the parable is waiting for each one of us to decide how the story will end. Will we give up our goodness and turn toward love and grace and forgiveness? Or will we hang on to our goodness and our rightness, and die with our shriveled hearts and our certainty about how much better we are than most of the people around us?

“When Jesus was having a meal in the house, many tax-collectors and sinners were seated with him and his disciples. Noticing this, the Pharisees said to his disciples, ‘Why is it that your teacher eats with tax-collectors and sinners?’ Hearing this Jesus said, ‘It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. Go and learn what this text

means, "I require mercy, not sacrifice." I did not come to call the virtuous [those busy being good and doing good], but sinners." (Matthew 9:10-13; Mark 2:15-17; Luke 5:29-32)

I only quote one passage, but over and over Jesus makes it clear: If you are good or think yourself good, Jesus wants nothing to do with you. If you are good, then you are not teachable, so what business could you and Jesus have with each other? All are *not* welcome. That is more of the malarkey of our present age. Only the sinners are welcome. Only the teachable, the humble, the broken-hearted – the truly repentant – are welcome.

Let's move on: "*Woe to you scribes and Pharisees*" There follows such a scathing indictment of the good guys that few people have ever read it more than once or twice. (Matthew 23:13-33, shadowed by Luke 11:42-44) The only way to miss the impact is to forget that the Pharisees are the good guys – the most sincere and conscientious representatives of Judaism in the world of Jesus' time.

And: "*As Jesus was starting out on a journey, a stranger ran up and, kneeling before him, asked, 'Good Teacher, what must I do to win eternal life?' Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.'*" (Mark 10:17-18; Luke 18:18-19; Matthew 19:16-17) Jesus and this stranger – frequently called "the rich young ruler" – have a fascinating conversation about commandments, and the encounter leads to the only time we know of that Jesus invites someone to become one of His inner circle of followers and the invitation is rejected. But if we refuse to be sidetracked, we notice that Jesus will not accept the suggestion that He is "good." Doubtless it is intended as a compliment, but Jesus knows that "goodness" is a compliment that only God can handle. For all the rest of us, including Jesus, it leads straight into Satan's traps.

Those are far from the only passages we could call to bear witness, but Jesus does not invite us into goodness. Goodness is the enemy. It is people trying to be good who crucify Him. It is people trying to be good who never understand His Gospel. The WAY of Life into which we are invited is not about us being good or trying to be good. If that ever truly and deeply sinks in, it will save you endless blunders, false starts, wrong efforts. Make a vow to God that you will never again try to be good, no matter how great the temptation.

THE PRINCIPLES AT WORK BEHIND THE SCENES

What's wrong with the principle of trying to be good? Trying to be good leads us into pride (*hubris*), and pride leads us into alienation. Not just "sort of" or "kind of" – not just once in a while. ALWAYS! Trying to be good leads us into pride, and pride leads us into alienation – never into love.

If it is my purpose to be good, how can I try to be good without wanting some evidence – some confirmation – that I am achieving my aim? So I look around at others, and what I need to see is that I am doing better than they are at being good. Then the games begin – Satan's games. And I may not know it yet, but I have already lost. Subtly, perhaps, but inevitably, wanting to be good makes me want to be better than others. How can I be humble if everything about my goal and purpose needs to conclude that I am doing better than others? Goodness is one of Satan's most clever ruses, and it leads straight into Satan's kingdom – never into God's Kingdom. We want to be good because we think we need to deserve love. We want to deserve love because then we can control it. Only, love can never be deserved or controlled.

So we throw away all efforts and desires to be good. We do not need them and never did. They always betray and undo us. God already loves us. The desire to become worthy of that love will always lead us into fear, mistrust, and doubt. Instead of grace, we try harder and harder to win what cannot be won. And the harder we try to convince ourselves that we are worthy of love and that we are good enough to deserve it, the more lost we become – the more rigid and self-righteous and unteachable we become.

When do I truly love someone? Can I huff and puff and work myself up to it? If I study the teachings, can I get guilty enough or ashamed enough that I can somehow turn that into love? Can I make the obligations serious enough or severe enough that it will morph into love? I love someone when the God of LOVE puts love in my heart for that person. I don't know how that happens; sometimes I don't even like it. But pretending does not help. And just as disturbing: if God gives me love for someone, pretending that the love is not there does not help either.

THE CONTRAST BETWEEN TRYING TO BE GOOD AND
ACTUALLY FOLLOWING JESUS

So it is never my goodness, my love, or my great-hearted compassion that drives the Christian Life. People who are trying to be good are not focused on God. They are focused on how well they are doing. They think that out of their own goodness and love, they can help others. They may hope that God will approve and thank them, be proud of them, and maybe even reward them – after God sees how hard they have tried and how well they did. But they are not trying to know what *God* is doing or trying to align their own lives with God. The Christian Life requires us to stay humble and honest and hopefully more real all the time. The secret of the Christian Life is never our goodness. The secret of the Christian Life is our obedience to the Holy Spirit – our trust and gratitude to the God who keeps putting opportunities and possibilities before us.

You heard in Paul's letter to the Philippians how clearly Paul realized and understood such things. And perhaps even a little of how annoyed he was toward those who still wanted to keep it a matter of physical circumcision and obeying the outward law.

In any case, can we leave this with something Jesus tried to teach us? It is not a favorite passage for anybody still trying to rely on their own goodness. But there is joy and delight in it for those of us who are learning to trust God.

“Suppose one of you has a servant ploughing or minding sheep. When he comes in from the fields, will the master say, ‘Come and sit down straight away’? Will he not rather say, ‘Prepare my supper; hitch up your robe, and wait on me while I have my meal. You can have yours afterwards’? Is he grateful to the servant for carrying out his orders? So with you: when you have carried out all you have been told to do, you should say, ‘We are servants and deserve no credit; we have only done what we were asked to do.’” (Luke 17:7-10)

We are not trying to be good. That puts us back in control. We are trying to be obedient to the influence and direction of the Holy Spirit. It is an entirely New and Different WAY of Life.