

Series: "Questions About Life and God"
"I'm a good person. Isn't that enough?"

This is the fourth in series of messages entitled "Questions About Life and God". This series was born out of a desire to address some of the questions that non-Christians are asking about God and the Bible and Christianity. Today I want to examine a viewpoint that many outside the church have. It's indicated when someone says, "I'm a good person. Isn't that enough?...I may not go to church and I'm not very religious, but I try my best to live a good life. Isn't that what counts in the end?"

Actually, I think that's not only a common view of people *outside* the church, but also of many *inside* the church. The bottom line for many is: are you a good person or not?

In fact, many people equate being a "Christian" with just being a "good person". I know first hand of a family where an elderly father was concerned for his grown son, who didn't go to church or seem to have much interest in spiritual matters. When the elderly father suggested that his son needs to be thinking about his life and God, the son got upset and remarked, "I try to live a good life." In other words, I'm a good person; what more do I need to do?

Many have the idea that if there is a God, and if there is some kind of final judgment, what counts in the end is whether the good things we do outweigh the bad things we do. Reader's Digest once asked famed boxer Muhammad Ali what his faith meant to him. Ali replied, "(It) means (a) ticket to heaven. One day we're all going to die, and God's going to judge us, (our) good and bad deeds. (If the) bad outweighs the good, you go to hell; if the good outweighs the bad, you go to heaven." A lot of people believe that.

So how do you answer someone who says, "I'm a good person. Isn't that enough?"

First, I think it should be said that whether we live a good life or not *is* important! There are Scriptures that tell us that we *will be judged* on the basis of what we do in this life – our works. Jeremiah 17:10 says, "I the Lord search the heart and examine the mind, to reward everyone according to their conduct, according to what their deeds deserve." Jesus said, "For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward everyone according to what they have done" (Matthew 16:27). And it says in 2 Corinthians 5:10, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that everyone may receive what is due them for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad."

In a world where there is so much that's wrong and hurtful, there's certainly something to be said for those who sincerely strive to do good.

But is that all there is to the Christian message? Is that all the Bible says about what's expected of us in life – just try to be a good person? Does that sum up Jesus' message – c'mon now, folks, try to be good! *I don't think so!*

The Bible has a totally different perspective on this matter of our goodness. Psalm 53:3 says, "There is no one who does good, no, not one." The writer of Psalm 130 wrote, "If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand?" (Psalm 130:3). Proverbs 20:9 says, "Who can say, 'I have kept my heart pure; I am clean and without sin'?" The prophet Isaiah said, "All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags" Isaiah 64:6. The Bible says that we are not that good!

I can imagine some of you at this point saying, "There you go! The church is always putting us down. Quoting the Bible to tell us how bad we are! I don't need that. I get put down enough!" I hear you. This is not my intent. But I believe this is *the truth* about human nature.

I can say, "Well, I just live a good life. That's what counts." But there's a million mile difference between *my goodness*, and *God's holiness*. And when I compare *my life* to the *life of Jesus* – the only Person who ever lived as God really intended us to live - my goodness pales compared to His.

Some years ago I was doing some painting in the dining room of a house we had bought. It was an older home, and we had these radiators on the floor that gave out heat. There was a metal covering over the radiator in our dining room. It was late at night, and so I turned on all the lights in the room so I could see. I finished painting the cover and it looked great. The next morning I got up, and the sun was shining in that room. And my paint job looked terrible. I could see spots I missed and I thought, my goodness, it looked great the night before! See, when I look at how good I am in the dim light of comparing myself to others, I may look pretty good. But when I compare my goodness to the dazzling Sonlight of Jesus' life, I don't look so great!

When the Bible, or the church, or a preacher like me points out that we're not all that good, that there's a flaw in our human nature called "sin", it isn't to put us down and make us feel worse about ourselves. It is to provide a proper diagnosis so we can get help!

Doctors, physicians, sometimes give us bad news: your gall bladder needs to come out, you've got skin cancer, you have 3 blocked arteries, your cataracts are getting worse. But do we want to get rid of doctors? Perhaps 17, 18 years ago, a general practitioner I didn't particularly like suggested I get a PSA test. So I did. It turned out that I had prostate cancer. This doctor saved my life.

When the Bible says that in ourselves none of us is that good or righteous, it's not just to smack us down, it's to diagnose the problem, and point us to where we can get help.

Being a Christian, and being acceptable to God, isn't a matter of being good enough. In fact, we only become a Christian when realize we aren't good enough! Christians are big on the idea of "grace." Do you know what grace means? Grace means that God is kind and good to us even though we don't deserve it and can never earn it.

The Bible says we are saved by grace. Ephesians 2:8-9 says: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God - not the result of works, so that no one may boast." Notice, not by works!

The whole idea of "grace" has no meaning unless first of all we realize we don't deserve God's goodness and mercy. Billy Graham once was driving in one of the southern states and got stopped for speeding. When talking with the highway patrolman Billy admitted he was in the wrong and he was guilty. But when the police officer realized that he had just given a ticket to the world famous evangelist, the policeman paid the ticket himself – and on top of that, took Billy out for a steak dinner! That's what grace is! Now if Billy had been stopped going 35 mph in a 45 mph zone, and the policeman left him off the hook, that wouldn't be grace – because he didn't deserve a ticket!

Grace begins, and a relationship with God begins, when we realize we *don't deserve it and there's nothing we can do to earn it.*

The Bible says that God's grace comes to us through Jesus! 2 Timothy 2:1 says, "Be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus." *See, if all God requires of us is that we try to live a good life, why did Jesus have to die?* If we could do it ourselves, what a waste for Jesus to go through the agony of His suffering and crucifixion! Galatians 2:21 says, "If righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing." I like *The Message* rendering of this verse: "If a living relationship with God could come by rule keeping, then Christ died unnecessarily."

Does this mean it doesn't matter if I try to be a good person or not?" No, not at all. For instance, we've looked at Ephesians 2:8-9 where it says we are saved by grace, not works. But the next verse goes on, "For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works" (Ephesians 2:10). Notice it says, "created in Christ Jesus to do good works." Once I'm saved through grace and have a new relationship with God, I should want to live a good life! In fact, when I become a follower of Jesus, He lives in me, and gives me a greater potential to be a much better person than I'd be without Him! But the critical difference is: *I do good not to justify myself before God. I do good out of gratitude, because God has loved me and accepted me in Christ.*

Do you get this? *Whenever someone says, "I try to live a good life, isn't that enough?" you can be sure that they've missed the heart of the Biblical message, and the gospel of grace!*

During a British conference on comparative religions, experts from around the world debated what belief, if any, was unique to Christianity. What does Christianity teach that other religions like Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam don't? While the debate continued, C.S. Lewis, the noted Christian writer, wandered into the room. "What's the (commotion) about?" he asked. His colleagues told him that they were discussing Christianity's unique contribution among world religions. C.S. Lewis responded, "Oh, that's easy. It's grace."

Rock music megastar Bono, lead singer of the band U2, said in an interview with beliefnet.com, “The most powerful idea that’s entered the world in the last few thousand years – the idea of grace – is the reason I would like to be a Christian.”

Timothy Paul Jones is co-author of a book about God's grace, a book titled *Proof*. I want to close with a story from that book. He writes:

"I never dreamed that taking a child to Disney World could be so difficult — or that such a trip could teach me so much about God’s outrageous grace. Our middle daughter had been previously adopted by another family. I am sure this couple had the best of intentions, but they never quite integrated the adopted child into their family of biological children. After a couple of rough years, they dissolved the adoption, and we ended up welcoming an eight-year-old girl into our home.

"For one reason or another, whenever our daughter’s previous family vacationed at Disney World, they took their biological children with them, but they left their adopted daughter with a family friend. Usually — at least in the child’s mind — this happened because she did something wrong that precluded her presence on the trip.

"And so, by the time we adopted our daughter, she had seen many pictures of Disney World and she had heard about the rides and the characters and the parades. But when it came to passing through the gates of the Magic Kingdom, she had always been the one left on the outside. Once I found out about this history, I made plans to take her to Disney World the next time a speaking engagement took our family to the southeastern United States...

"What I *didn't* expect was that the prospect of visiting this dreamworld would produce a stream of downright devilish behavior in our newest daughter. In the month leading up to our trip to the Magic Kingdom, she stole food when a simple request would have gained her a snack. She lied when it would have been easier to tell the truth. She whispered insults that were carefully crafted to hurt her older sister as deeply as possible — and, as the days on the calendar moved closer to the trip, her mutinies multiplied.

"A couple of days before our family headed to Florida, I pulled our daughter into my lap to talk through her latest escapade. 'I know what you’re going to do,' she stated flatly. 'You’re not going to take me to Disney World, are you?' The thought hadn’t actually crossed my mind, but her downward spiral suddenly started to make some sense. She knew she couldn't earn her way into the Magic Kingdom – she had tried and failed that test several times before — so she was living in a way that placed her as far as possible from the most magical place on earth.

"In retrospect, I’m embarrassed to admit that, in that moment, I was tempted to turn her fear to my own advantage. The easiest response would have been, 'If you don’t start behaving better, you’re right, we won’t take you' — but, by God’s grace, I didn’t. Instead,

I asked her, 'Is this trip something we're doing as a family?' She nodded, brown eyes wide and tear-rimmed. 'Are you part of this family?' She nodded again. 'Then you're going with us. Sure, there may be some consequences to help you remember what's right and what's wrong — but you're part of our family, and we're not leaving you behind.'

"I'd like to say that her behaviors grew better after that moment. They didn't. Her choices pretty much spiraled out of control at every hotel and rest stop all the way to Lake Buena Vista. Still, we headed to Disney World on the day we had promised..."

'In our hotel room that evening, a very different child emerged. She was exhausted, pensive, and a little weepy at times, but her month-long facade of rebellion had faded. When bedtime rolled around, I prayed with her, held her, and asked, 'So how was your first day at Disney World?' She closed her eyes and snuggled down into her stuffed unicorn. After a few moments, she opened her eyes ever so slightly. 'Daddy,' she said, 'I finally got to go to Disney World. But it wasn't because I was good; it's because I'm yours.'"

It wasn't because I was good; it's because I'm yours. That's the message of outrageous grace!

See, when you say, "I'm a good person, isn't that enough" you've missed the whole Christian message, the good news about God's outrageous grace, that we're not accepted into God's magic kingdom and family because we're good, but because Jesus is good, and gave up His life for us.

I love something Timothy Paul Jones writes after telling this story about his adopted daughter: "(God's grace) is the "one-way love that calls you into the kingdom not because you've been good but because God has chosen you and made you his own. And now he is chasing you to the ends of the earth to keep you as his child, and nothing in heaven or hell can ever stop him..."

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