

THE PROBLEM OF GOOD

Have any of you ever tried to do any good? Yes, my tongue is in my cheek, as they say. It is still a real question. Have you ever tried to bring any improvement to your home, to your work, to a school, to your church, to any organization or endeavor you have ever cared about? And what was the result? The result may have ended up very satisfying. Maybe not. When we set out to do good, the result is not supposed to be our most important concern. But why is that? Why do we have to steel ourselves against evaluating our efforts to do good in terms of the results?

You are ahead of me, aren't you? No matter what our evaluation regarding the results, every single time we try to do good, bring improvement, increase benefit or blessing to any person or to any purpose, we run into trouble: We run into opposition. We cause turmoil and maybe even mayhem. We make some people angry at us. We may gain some support, but we also lose support, and even frequently we lose some friends. (At least for a while.)

Why is that? And why didn't more of my teachers and mentors prepare me for this principle when I was growing up? Trying to do good causes evil. At least if you think that causing trouble, causing anger and animosity, causing trouble in relationships and between people can be associated with evil, then trying to do good causes evil.

Much of our dilemma is alluded to in Christian theology under the category of "The Fall." Do not think *only* of the Garden of Eden story. That merely introduces the problem. The whole concept of this earth-place as a lost and alienated realm, imperfect and incomplete, is basic to all Christian understanding. We are not perfect here – we are not whole – and nothing here is. That also applies to the way we approach and describe truth, it applies to all our relationships, and it applies to all of our best things, not just our worst things. We have reason for profound humility, even when we are being Christian, even when we are being patriotic, even when we celebrate the wonder of motherhood and family love. This world is far from perfect, and it fights all efforts to improve anything – us included. Always when we remember God, humility is mixed with gratitude ... and turns into love. But a lot of the draw and power of spiritual awakening is because it is so partial and lonely here.

We sense a truth and a reality beyond anything we have known, yet we cannot reach it. Though we hunger for it and long for it, and sometimes strive toward it, something in us and all around us also works against it. Sadly, even our striving is corrupted by our place and experience in this half-life, this broken world, this realm full of Pinocchios longing and trying to become real people. You are not the only one who feels this way, you know; the others just don't say so very often, for the same reasons you don't. So how do we know anything correctly or do anything rightly when everything is already and always affected by this alienation and partiality? How do we know what to do to truly live, when everything we have ever known has always died?

This awareness of the lostness and brokenness of this world is the foundation of all Christian conviction about our need for a Savior. And it is the reason Christendom is never willing to settle for lesser titles for Jesus or to share His place with other historic people, however interesting or impressive. If we live in a broken realm, we do not need a teacher, a friend, a counselor, a president, a warrior, or a judge, though all of these can be helpful at times and in certain ways, as far as they go. But if we live in a broken world, we need a Savior. Convinced that we were *sent* a Savior, Christendom is not willing to share that title with people who are teachers, friends, counselors, gurus, presidents, warriors, or judges. *“For the love of Christ controls us, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.”* (II Corinthians 5:14-15) It is not a title, nor is it an “office” you can run for. It doesn't matter how much I might admire Siddhartha Gautama the Buddha or Paramahansa Yogananda the Seer – that doesn't turn either one of them into a Savior. Nor, by the way, do their titles or the religions they founded suggest that this is their function.

A quick review: We have trouble knowing who Jesus is because we have trouble knowing who we are. We have trouble discerning or moving toward the truth because our own perspective is always and already corrupted by our own subjective experiences. We live in a broken, alienated world – that is, a realm estranged from God. We need a Savior. It is the Christian Faith (not fact – faith) that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ – the Savior sent from God.

None of us have to believe that. Nothing is trying to make us believe that against our will. Oh, we might run into a few individuals who *try* to make us believe it against our will, but they have no understanding. They are just trying to paint by numbers to keep from facing the darkness of their own doubts. They don't mean the harm they do, any more than we mean some of the harm that we do.

The thing that often escapes notice, or at least it keeps escaping mine, is that being sent a Savior strongly implies that we are worth saving. This "worth," I think, is never very clear to us. The Creator values us more highly than we can comprehend, and the clear fact is that we do not believe it. For reasons we cannot comprehend, we are sent a Savior (which is why we call it "grace"). It is, then, a pure ACT OF FAITH to claim the worth that is being revealed, although we do not understand it at all. (*"This is my body broken for you ... my blood poured out for you."*) There is an inevitable connection between recognizing Jesus' true identity, and getting a strong hint that your own identity is higher than you thought. While the connection is inevitable, it is not automatically noticed or accepted, even among Christians.

Let us insist: One of the claims of the Christian Faith is that you are a higher order of being than you know or realize. If not, the body and blood of the Son of God could never, ever have been broken or poured out for you; if you took it into yourself, it would be violently thrown off, as the body throws off every organ or cell it considers foreign to itself. This is the part of the Christian Faith that is even harder to face and deal with than whatever we think or conclude about Jesus. That is, believing in Jesus is hard enough for us, but what believing in Jesus does to what we believe about ourselves – that's the hardest thing of all!

Let's get back to Jesus for a few moments. (Whew! Anything to get the limelight off of us.) What is the most difficult or traumatic thing about His story? There is more than one good answer to that question, but for me, it's the trouble Jesus caused because of His goodness. Even allowing for the difference between His pure purpose and my mixed motives, that continues to amaze and dumbfound me. What did Jesus want for Himself? A great deal, but very little of it was attached to this realm. No matter how familiar this becomes through repetition and study, it remains startling. Apparently I'm a slow learner. I was raised to think that evil caused trouble, and that everybody liked goodness. I was raised to think that being bad got us into trouble, and that being good would

bring approval, appreciation, sometimes even rewards. Philosophically, I understand that God wouldn't dream of designing a world in such a way, lest we do the good only for the earthly rewards and never learn to love the good for its own sake. Nevertheless, that's the way I was raised to think, and I have had a hard time getting over it.

The Message of the New Testament is set in the context of a story which proves that human beings do not trust goodness and do not believe in goodness. Over and over, the Gospel writers ask, in subtle and not-so-subtle ways: Why did Jesus have to die? (What had my Lord done?) What were His crimes that deserved such a death? He healed the lame; made the blind to see; gave hope to the hopeless; taught about caring and a loving God; offered forgiveness; invited us to live for a Kingdom higher than this physical plane – a Kingdom both in and beyond this world. For *this* He became Public Enemy Number One! For this He was hated and condemned – not by men we think of as evil, but by some of the best, most sincere, most religious and conscientious humans the world had ever produced. It was *goodness* that got Jesus into trouble. *You* understand this, I know. People who do not understand this know zilch about Jesus and comprehend nothing at all about the Christian Faith. Nevertheless, I seem to be endlessly amazed and stupefied by it.

It was goodness that got Jesus into trouble. Sometimes I think of the jealousy that must have been operating. That was part of it, no doubt, but not all of it. Sometimes I reflect on what it must have been like for the Sanhedrin and the Pharisee teachers and scribes to be confronted with this New Movement that made their views and their reform movement seem inadequate. Hurt pride had to be part of it, but surely not all of it. *What* then? Their deepest conviction of all was that Jesus was doing and saying things so good, there had to be an ulterior motive. None of the teachers or political leaders believed that goodness could exist in this world at the magnitude that Jesus was displaying. It had to be a ruse, a strategy. They were absolutely certain that Jesus was after something He was not admitting to anybody. Nobody was that good – that concerned about others – without a hidden motive. They were absolutely sure that Jesus was operating the way *they* usually did. So they knew that if Jesus' following continued to grow, it would somehow be more and more dangerous.

The longer they watched, the more convinced they became that Jesus was indeed incredibly dangerous. And they were right! But not for any of the reasons they suspected. It is imperative for us to know why.

Goodness is even more dangerous in this world than evil is. That is, disruption, change, and turmoil will result in this realm at least as quickly from goodness as it will from evil. If you don't believe it, start treating your neighbor's children as if they were the most precious people in the world. In less than a week, you will have some very nervous, jealous and, if you don't cease and desist, angry parents on your hands. A broken, estranged, alienated world *means* that goodness is not at home here. Goodness is not peaceful here. If you become well-adjusted and mature here, you are far from God. If you learn to get along well and be successful here and that's all you are doing here – that is, if you are content to leave it at that – then you are a disgrace to the Kingdom. Did Jesus know this? (If He didn't, I sure wouldn't.) Listen to Him:

“Blessed are you when men hate you, and when they exclude you and revile you, and cast out your name as evil, on account of the Son of man! Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets. But woe to you that are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you that are full now, for you shall hunger. Woe to you that laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep. Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets.” (Luke 6:22-26)

We live in a broken world. Goodness is as “foreign” and “wrong” here as evil. Doing “good” will cause you every bit as much trouble here as being bad. (I actually believe it will cause you more trouble than being bad, but I'm being extremely careful today not to overstate anything.) While some of us may not know this on the conscious level, we all know it on the subconscious level. The problem is that in knowing it on the subconscious level, we *avoid our goodness* and shield against knowing it, admitting it, or living by it. These shields are thick, high, and maintained with twenty-four-hour surveillance. The subconscious knows that goodness can get us killed, just like it did Him. All of us are cutting back our goodness all the time. Yet Jesus knows that if He cannot get through the shields to awaken our goodness, we will never be fit for the Kingdom. Therein lies the great battle for the soul, which is the true drama of the New Testament and the Christian Way.

Answer these questions (if you dare): In a group of really good friends, would you be more comfortable admitting to some fault, or admitting to some virtue? Would you rather share a story of some mistake or blunder or character defect, or a story that reveals what a wonderful or righteous or caring person you really are? All of us have both sides to our nature. So are you comfortable talking with your best friends about your goodness? You actually know, by instinct if not by logic, that if you put your virtue out in the open, it will turn people against you. It's okay if *others* discover it and talk about it. But if you know it and claim it, even your best friends will begin to suspect hidden motives.

Very few people will tell me of their goodness without enormous encouragement and patience on my part. They admit fairly easily to all manner of stupidity, immorality, low-grade selfishness, anger, fear, etc. They know I will understand because I'm so at home with such things myself. But they are terribly cautious about mentioning any truly good qualities or motives or purposes. They don't think I can grasp or appreciate that.

Instinctively, of course, they know that revealing the good will get them hated, or at least misunderstood. Only, it's worse than that: On the conscious level, after all the years of repression, people even suspect that perhaps their own inner goodness is just an aberration, a false front. Maybe if they bring it out, I might find some way to reveal its falseness, and that would be too painful for words. So they keep true goodness hidden from me, and from themselves. Niceness, of course, is okay. But I'm not talking about good manners. I'm talking about goodness.

Have any of you engaged in psychotherapy? What was the focus? Childhood trauma, problems with parents and siblings, low self-esteem, anger, fear, betrayal, abandonment? How much time was spent helping you come to terms with your idealism, your nobility, your generosity and courage and love (I mean, without mocking or denying it)? Did you go over the memories of the times you were too generous or too loving or too forgiving and paid heavy prices for them? Did you get help to return to that goodness, and to not care what price you had to pay for it?

We are trying to build a world where humility is a disease; where true service stinks; where ideals are naive; where nobility is an aberration; where love is just some weak person needing approval. We cannot admit that there is any true goodness within us, and so it becomes harder

and harder to imagine that it could exist in anybody else, even in small quantities. Naturally, that means we have a lot of trouble with Jesus.

“What is man that thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that thou dost care for him? Yet thou hast made him little less than God, and dost crown him with glory and honor.... He who sanctifies and those who are sanctified have all one origin. That is why he is not ashamed to call them brethren.” (Hebrews 2:6-11) Who is this “brother” of ours? This One who *“reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power”*? (Hebrews 1:3) Nevertheless, we are ashamed or afraid to find or admit any goodness within us?

It is my own conviction that most of us come into adult consciousness believing that we are evil, or at least “dark,” at the very core of our being. Some of us make jokes about it and some of us try desperately to hide it, but that is the conclusion. Goodness is a facade. If you cut beneath any of our good motives, you will come to a deeper anger, hurt, fear, or hatred. Most people do not spend much time in contemplation or in prayer and meditation because they know it will take them into this labyrinth of dark motives and evil desires. They do not want to spend time with the inner being – time with themselves or their God – because it is too dark a journey.

Truly it is a terrible bind and paradox. We must have *some* kind of hope or trust that we will find light and love at the center, or we don't dare go find out what *is* at the center. The Good News of Jesus the Christ is not only that Jesus is the Savior and that God is love. If you are truly dark or evil at the core and God loves you – loves that which is truly evil – then *God* would be evil, and that is not good news.

No, the Good News of Jesus the Christ is not only that God is love but that *YOU* are good at the very core of your being – that there is light and love at the center of who you really are; that underneath all the darkness, pain, anger, fear, and bad behavior, you are God's true child, created for life and love and light. Your true identity is far higher than you know. Goodness is not the aberration – evil is the aberration. Satan is the Father of Lies, and we have to stop believing the lies about who we are and what we are like. You are good at the very core of your being. The fear, resentment, anger, doubt, and worthlessness – and all the other stuff that clings to you so convincingly in this broken place – are all temporary, and deeply untrue. It is your *goodness* that is genuine.

It is your goodness that will survive. Goodness is tough stuff, you know. After all you have done to beat it out of yourself, it is still there, eager and waiting.

Goodness will always be a problem in this world. It will always get you into trouble here. Some of you do not like trouble. You always want to switch from evil and darkness into neutral, where you can find peace and be left alone. You have the wrong religion and the wrong Savior, if that's what you want. Goodness is always trouble in this world. Jesus is always trouble in this world. You can follow Him out of bad trouble into good trouble, but never into neutral. I must remember! I hope you will try to remember too. The realm that loves goodness comes later.

Not many places or many sources give us genuine help with the problem of goodness. But to be truly alive, we must acknowledge, honor, and respond to the goodness within, knowing full well that it is immensely dangerous in this world. It does not help to just use positive words or pretend that we think we are good. It takes true authority to break us out of the traps and assumptions on which this world is run – authority wiser than the wisdom of this world, and stronger than death.

Jesus' most difficult task (Mission Impossible) on this earth is to reveal that God our Creator loves us truly and personally. The Savior's Mission is nearly impossible because, aside from our struggles to believe in God's love, we cannot receive any such love as long as we believe ourselves to be evil at the core. We must be touched by the Savior's love that goes into, through, and past all our evil and anguish and guilt and shame – right to the core of our beings. Then we can begin to receive God – to hear and even obey God. Then we can begin to admit, and live by, the goodness we find within and all around us. It is amazing that so much goodness could have been there all along, but we did not notice it or trust it.