

WHAT'S WRONG WITH BEING GOOD?

"Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost." Titus 3:5.

One of the most popular notions of our time is that personal likeableness and social respectability should pass muster anywhere—even before the judgment bar of God.

This idea is expressed in many ways, as, for example, when a woman recently said to a minister, "My husband is a very good man, one of the best I ever knew. Of course, he never goes to church." What sort of thinking lies behind a statement like that? Is it clear or muddled? Muddled, without a doubt.

Our Lord Jesus met this attitude occasionally. Regarding those who looked to themselves, and to nothing beyond themselves, for their goodness, He said: "I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." Matthew 9:13.

The Apostle Paul met this attitude too. As a matter of fact, he first met it in himself, although there was a long time when he did not recognize it. Those were the days when he belonged to the crowd of people who were "going about to establish their own righteousness." But there came an hour when all that self-delusion burst like a bubble and he saw the deep unrighteousness of his self-righteousness. Now, at the time we meet him in our text, he was a mature man, mellow with the wisdom of Christianity. He is in prison. Yonder on the island of Crete is his friend Titus, in charge of the Christian enterprise there. O Titus, he cries, his great soul swelling with gratitude to God, O Titus, let's never forget that we have not saved ourselves, nor are we now saving ourselves. On the contrary, "When the goodness and lovingkindness of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit."

Here, then, we have the contrast between man's way of realizing goodness and God's way. Let us examine it more closely.

I. Morality Versus Mercy.

We see that in man's way of saving himself the great word is morality; in God's way the great word is mercy.

"Works of righteousness which we have done!" There you have the whole system of personal and social morality of which human pride makes so much. Decency, kindness, industry, courage, patience—all these acknowledged virtues go into the making of this system.

"And isn't that enough?" multitudes are asking. Why drag in religion? Why bother with the church? Why harp on sin and a Saviour? Here is the good life; and if we want it, we can have it, with no complications like theology, sermons and prayers.

What is wrong with that kind of talk? Several things.

1. It is too simple.

It seems to say that my goodness is my own. I thought it up. I worked it out. It is my achievement. Now, whether you rule out religion or not, that view of things is just not in harmony with the facts.

If you are "good" in the ordinary way of thinking about goodness, you owe your goodness, in large measure, to people and events entirely outside of yourself. There are parts of the world where human beings live as savages. If you had been born in one of those parts, you would be a savage today—filthy, ignorant, cruel and treacherous. Instead, you have had the good fortune to be born in a

society that is the product of centuries of progress from savagery to civilization.

The decencies that regulate your life were not worked out by you. They were inherited. You borrowed them. And those persons who have influenced you-- parents, ministers and teachers borrowed them from others who went before them. These things which we commonly associate with the good life in Western civilization have come down to us as a heritage from the past.

2. It is too selfish.

Take the man who says, "Don't preach Jesus Christ to me. I'm good enough, or I can make myself good enough." Now, isn't it clear that this man has put himself right in the middle of everything? His self-trust leads to self-evaluation and that comes out at a place called self-satisfaction. Will someone please explain to me how that sort of thinking can be kept from ending with a huge something called pride? And pride is a sin from which people need to be saved. Morality without the gospel produces the Pharisee, not the saint!

3. It is too superficial.

Recall the case of the elder brother in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. The older son could see the revelling and wrong conduct in the conduct of his younger brother. He was very moral in comparison with him. But what he could not recognize was the jealousy, the irritability and the lack of sympathy that coiled like snakes in his own bosom. It is always so with people who boast of goodness, outside the grace of God. They have a shallow view of goodness which overlooks many a bad thing that mars their conduct or poisons their character.

Thus man's way of salvation by morality always breaks down somewhere. The Scriptures are giving us a grim fact when they solemnly charge: "All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God." Romans 3:23. Therefore, if we are saved, it is always by an act of God's mercy. "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy He saved us." Any other view than this is too simple, too selfish and too superficial.

II. Niceness Versus Newness.

Man is satisfied with niceness; God is content with nothing less than newness. "He saved us by the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit." Both phrases speak of newness. The first does so in a negative way. It refers to the cleansing aspect of what happens to a man when he gives up to Jesus Christ. Old sins and guilts are forgiven. Old stains are removed. Old records are set straight. It is not a coat of whitewash that Christ gives, but a washing white.

The second phrase, the "renewing of the Holy Spirit," is positive. It speaks of the new life and spirit, the new motive and dynamic, that the Spirit of God creates within us when we surrender to Christ. The work of Christ as Saviour means more than getting rid of evils we have and don't want; it means receiving something we did not have and desperately need, such as love, peace, gratitude, good-will and moral power.

Many people claim that they do not see any need of this radical overhauling in the human personality, this basic reorientation of our relationships to God and man and ourselves. They figure that what is needed is just a certain self-regulation of the ego within, a certain amiableness and a harmlessness in the community. What is more such people often picture themselves as being several notches better than some Christians who, in spite of their profession of faith, are sometimes not very lovable, in fact, very disagreeable. That sort of thing causes some unsaved to conclude that it is better to be nice without Christ than to be crude and ill-tempered with Him.

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But, where man puts up the front of niceness God comes along and smashes it in favor of an inner and essential newness.

III. Happiness In Time Versus Hope For Eternity.

In man's plan of goodness the main concern is to be happy in time; in God's plan the concern is to possess hope for eternity. Let verse seven speak its message: "That being justified by his grace we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life."

What's wrong with being good? If it is your own goodness you are concerned about, with God dismissed and Christ ignored, then you will play around here for a few fleeting years, and your life will go out like a breeze-blown candle. You will make yourself as comfortable as possible, even if it is at other people's expense. You will try every formula, except the right one, if it promises you "peace of mind."

Now turn the picture around. Your boast is not in your morality but God's mercy. You have given up the niceness of human polish for the newness of divine life. You are living where the love of Christ within you makes you "zealous of good works."

In these good works--opposing evil, teaching truth, healing the hurt, telling the story of Christ's saving grace--you know that you are linked up with the eternal goodness and the everlasting purposes of God. You know that, though you die, His truth will go on, His love will live on, His name will carry all foes before it. You know that your part in the conflict will be rewarded, and that not one cup of love given out in His name will fail to gain His ultimate blessing.

Knowing this, there are no days too dark for you to live through them. There are no boisterous outbreaks of wickedness too terrifying for you to see through them. There is no death so lonely and painful that you think of it as doom.

You have eternal life and nobody can take it from you. The story is told of some little girls who were listening while a teacher was describing Abraham as he took Isaac to Mount Moriah to offer him in sacrifice. The teacher was making the story vivid. She reached the point where Abraham was ready to use the knife. Suddenly a little girl burst out: "Oh, please don't go on. The story is too terrible." But a second girl spoke up: "Oh, Mary, don't be silly. This is one of God's stories, and they always come out right."

Something like that is in the thinking of every informed and trusting Christian. He is part of God's story, and God's stories always, yes, always, come out right in the end. We are "heirs according to the hope of eternal life."

What's wrong with being good? Everything--if it is your own goodness. Nothing--if it is God's goodness.