

“Thou Shalt Do Good”

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Amos 5:6-15

Mark 10:17-31

*And as [Jesus] was setting out on his journey,
a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him,
“Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”*

And Jesus said to him,

“Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.

Mark 10:17-18

Let us pray... O God,

Help us see that you alone are perfectly good and that we cannot be the same as you.

But help us to perfect ourselves to be more loving and therefore, more like you.

Amen

I have always had a problem with this text:

And Jesus said to him,

“Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. [Mark 10:18]

It seems like a blank check for people to opt out of the responsibility to do good –
though there will always be plenty of people who have no problem with
judging someone else about what they think is right or wrong.

This verse also lends itself to put down those who already have low self-esteem
as if to confirm their negative opinion of themselves –
and thus, copping out from legitimately doing good for oneself.

I’m more inclined to believe Jesus was joking with this fellow

to test what he thought about who Jesus was, as if getting him to say:

“Oh... You’re good because *you* are God!”

This idea that Jesus is God – is a tricky concept in itself, for us Protestants to grasp,
but perhaps a better way to think of this relationship is that

God is like Jesus rather than trying to imagine how Jesus is like God.

God is like Jesus who heals, teaches, feeds, and loves people,

who fearlessly confronts evil, and who even has a sense of humor.

The challenge then for us is to become more like Jesus ourselves –

to become more perfectly human as we seek to become more Christ-like
and do what is good...

Then again, the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Ephesians, reminds us that:

⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith;

and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God—

⁹ not because of works, lest any[one] should boast. [Eph. 2:8-9]

Willard, p.2

This is another cop out from the responsibility to do the right thing,
but the take-away lesson should be that no one should presume
to work off past sins by doing charity as a kind of 'money-laundering'.
You are already forgiven as you choose to do the right thing, do the loving thing,
do the honest thing for its own sake as a grateful response
for God's grace and the opportunities that come with it.
Another way of looking at challenges that arise is that
it is not always up to us to fix them, but we have the responsibility to help.

Jesus did answer the rich man's question – who is portrayed here
as someone who earnestly was seeking an answer.
This fellow was probably from a good family, very educated, and motivated
to be an achiever.
He is not like the arrogant 'scribes and Pharisees' who were always trying
to trip Jesus up with their questions and indict him for something.
Instead, Jesus sized him up and had compassion for him,
because this fellow couldn't see how blind he was by privilege.
Jesus, then, gave him the prescription:
Sell all you have and give to the poor.
This was too much for the rich man to bear
and so, he walked away with a downcast face.

Would any of us have done any different?
Hard to say, but there have been people throughout history who were able
to do just that.
Francis of Assisi stripped down in the town square and gave away his privileges
as a rich young man to become a begging friar.
In time, he started his own religious order blessed by the Catholic Church,
and which still bears his name – the Franciscans.

Francis believed he was answering a call from God to rebuild the church –
which he took literally to mean rebuilding a church ruin in San Damiano.
With the vantage point of history, however, he was part of a movement
that was already underway within the Church and society.
This was not an organized revolution, but seems to have been helped
by a variety of individuals and influences to be what has been called
the Little Renaissance.

Between 1150 and 1250 CE, there was a flourishing of artistic expression
especially characterized by roving troubadours who sang ballads
proclaiming courtly love and chivalric romance.
The tales of King Arthur had their beginning then – especially, the stories about
the quest for the Holy Grail, the cup Jesus used at the Last Supper.

Willard, p.3

It is believed the Knight Templars may have had something to do with this, having excavated areas in the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, supposedly to find something – perhaps the Grail itself, but almost certainly something that revolutionized the architecture of churches and castles from that period on.

Another personality of this era was Hildegard of Bingen, an abbess who was also a mystic visionary, artist, writer, herbalist, philosopher, and a ‘renaissance woman’ before there was even a category for this.

She was a strong woman in a Church and world run by men, and though it would be hard to assess the impact she had on her own time, her work and legacy have lived on.

Hildegard lived at the beginning of the Little Renaissance so neither she nor Francis crossed paths.

But they were part of the same Spirit that sought expression in a period of terrible violence – the Crusades in the Middle East. Yet contact with the Muslims may have carried the seeds for change, despite war with them.

Access to the libraries of the Muslims led crusaders to reintroduce Western cultures to the classic writings of the Greek philosophers as well as Arabic studies about mathematics, science, and medicine. The style of drumming in European music of this time suggests Arabic influence; and the practice of church bells tolling the hours in village squares is like the muezzin’s call to prayer five times a day in Islamic lands. There was also a respect for women woven into Islamic traditions that may have inspired the popularity of chivalric romance.

Combat with the Muslims was no less brutal than what is being reported in our time, but there were instances of noble behavior between enemies – with particular respect for Saladin the Sultan of Egypt.

Perhaps as an attempt to control the powerful warrior class as well as introduce the responsibility of the strong to care for the weak, a ‘Knights Code of Chivalry’ emerged with endorsement by the Church. Here is an example of such a code, adapted from one found in the “Song of Roland” – an epic poem popular during the Little Renaissance though composed earlier...

Willard, p.4

A true knight was expected:

To fear God and maintain [the] Church
To serve the liege lord in valour and faith
To protect the weak and defenceless
To [aid] widows and orphans
To refrain from the [willful] giving of offence
To live by honour and for glory
To despise [financial] reward
To fight for the welfare of all
To obey those placed in authority
To guard the honour of fellow knights
To [reject] unfairness, meanness and deceit
To keep faith
At all times to speak the truth
To persevere to the end in any enterprise begun
To respect the honour of women
Never to refuse a challenge from an equal
Never to turn the back upon a foe

<http://www.medieval-life-and-times.info/medieval-knights/code-of-chivalry.htm>

It is unlikely that this code was universally practiced historically, considering the corruption and brutality of the medieval feudal system. Still it exists as an ideal – one that could have some application for community relations in our time:

to remind the strong in the majority to care for the weak in the minority.

By the 16th Century CE,

Miguel Cervantes' novel, Don Quixote, was a satirical look at the presumptions of chivalry as an outdated farce.

In the 20th Century CE,

Don Quixote was adapted as a Broadway musical, "The Man From LaMancha" – which speaks to the enduring hope for someone to 'right the unrightable wrong'.

Perhaps a new chivalry – that applies to women as well as men, is called for these days, that seeks to reintroduce honesty and mercy, self-restraint and self-sacrifice – with the exception of introducing nonviolent confrontation, rather than violent combat as a principle value.

Such a code would be in keeping with the message of the Prophet Amos who challenged ancient Israel to:

Seek good and not evil, that you may live;

and so the Lord, the God of heavenly forces, will be with you...

Hate evil, love good, and establish justice at the city gate. [Amos 5:14^a,15^a]

Willard, p. 5

There is the expectation – certainly that God has for us
but that we also have of ourselves that we are to do what is right.
We are to do what is good, though perhaps not so dramatically
as Don Quixote, who said:

*Hear me now, O thou bleak and unbearable world,
Thou art base and debauched as can be;
And a knight with his banners all bravely unfurled
Now hurls down his gauntlet to thee!*

<http://www.stlyrics.com/lyrics/manoflamanchadonquixote/manoflamanchaidonquixote.htm>

Maybe, maybe not, but we still need to believe
that God is still speaking and acting in this world
and that the Beloved Community that Jesus promised us
is still unfolding on Earth as it is in Heaven –
and calling us to help build it up.
If nothing else, we need to believe it is possible...

And as Don Quixote said in “The Man From LaMancha”:

*It is the mission of each true knight...
His duty... nay, his privilege!*

*To dream the impossible dream, To fight the unbeatable foe,
To bear with unbearable sorrow
To run where the brave dare not go;
To right the unrightable wrong. To love, pure and chaste, from afar,
To try, when your arms are too weary,
To reach the unreachable star!*

*This is my Quest to follow that star,
No matter how hopeless, no matter how far,
To fight for the right Without question or pause,
To be willing to march into hell For a heavenly cause!*

*And I know, if I'll only be true To this glorious Quest,
That my heart will lie peaceful and calm
When I'm laid to my rest.*

*And the world will be better for this,
That [someone], scorned and covered with scars,
Still strove, with [their] last ounce of courage,
To reach the unreachable stars!*

<http://www.stlyrics.com/lyrics/manoflamanchadonquixote/impossibledreamthequest.htm>

Amen

*Our scripture lesson today is Amos 5:6-15 from the Common English Bible.
Amos was an early prophet whose writings are characterized as
calling Israel to account for the sake of justice and peace...*

- [6] Seek the Lord and live, or else God might rush like a fire
against the house of Joseph.
The fire will burn up Bethel, with no one to put it out.
- [7] Doom to you who turn justice into poison,
and throw righteousness to the ground!
- [8] The one who made the Pleiades and Orion,
and turns deep darkness into the morning, and darkens the day into night;
who summons the waters of the sea,
and pours them out on the surface of the earth— this one's name is the Lord—
- [9] who causes destruction to flash out against the strong,
so that destruction comes upon the fortress.
- [10] They hate the one who judges at the city gate,
and they reject the one who speaks the truth.
- [11] Truly, because you crush the weak, and because you tax their grain,
you have built houses of carved stone, but you won't live in them;
you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you won't drink their wine.
- [12] I know how many are your crimes, and how numerous are your sins—
afflicting the righteous, taking money on the side,
turning away the poor who seek help.
- [13] Therefore, the one who is wise will keep silent in that time;
it is an evil time.
- [14] Seek good and not evil, that you may live;
and so the Lord, the God of heavenly forces,
will be with you just as you have said.
- [15] Hate evil, love good, and establish justice at the city gate.
Perhaps the Lord God of heavenly forces
will be gracious to what is left of Joseph.

Mark 10:17-31

- ¹⁷ And as [Jesus] was setting out on his journey,
a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him,
“Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”
- ¹⁸ And Jesus said to him,
“Why do you call me good?
No one is good but God alone.
- ¹⁹ You know the commandments:
‘Do not kill, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal,
Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud,
Honor your father and mother.’”
- ²⁰ And he said to him,
“Teacher, all these I have observed from my youth.”
- ²¹ And Jesus looking upon him loved him, and said to him,
“You lack one thing; go, sell what you have, and give to the poor,
and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.”
- ²² At that saying his countenance fell, and he went away sorrowful;
for he had great possessions.
- ²³ And Jesus looked around and said to his disciples,
“How hard it will be for those who have riches
to enter the kingdom of God!”
- ²⁴ And the disciples were amazed at his words.
But Jesus said to them again,
“Children, how hard it is^(a) to enter the kingdom of God!
²⁵ It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle
than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”
- ²⁶ And they were exceedingly astonished, and said to him,
“Then who can be saved?”
- ²⁷ Jesus looked at them and said,
“With men it is impossible, but not with God;
for all things are possible with God.”
- ²⁸ Peter began to say to him,
“Lo, we have left everything and followed you.”
- ²⁹ Jesus said,
“Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left
house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands,
for my sake and for the gospel,
³⁰ who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time,
houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children
and lands, with persecutions,
and in the age to come eternal life.
- ³¹ But many that are first will be last, and the last first.”