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Why Be Good?

a sermon on Romans 6.1-14

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A woman recently wrote an interesting critique of Christianity. She didn't like all this talk about *grace*. If God just forgives our sins, she asked, where is the motivation to live right? If you are saved by grace, she reasoned, then what you do doesn't matter. So, why be good? She claimed to have sought answers to this dilemma from many different preachers, but none could explain it to her. (I wonder how hard she really tried. Every preacher I know would have talked her ear off explaining this.) She concluded that she could not accept Christianity because it logically leads to people living however they want because they have no good reason to be good.

I call this interesting because it is the opposite of the usual complaint against Christianity. Usually people complain that Christians are too moralistic, too judgmental, too hung up on how people live and act. I have heard many sermons about obeying the Ten Commandments, loving my neighbor, and the like. I have never heard a pastor say, "You can do whatever you want. God will forgive you." And maybe that is part of the woman's problem. The Christians she sees *are* very serious about being good, and she cannot figure out why. If God forgives sin ... if we are saved solely by grace ... then why be good? Why do we talk so much about loving our neighbor or being honest or moral? Why does any of that matter?

This is not a new question. Paul saw it coming and addressed it in his letter to the Romans. He had been teaching about grace. And, by the way, the woman understood the issue of grace well, better than some Christians do, I fear. God does forgive sin. He does save us solely by grace, because of what Jesus did for us on the cross. This is the Good News. Grace gives us assurance of our eternal destiny. If God set a standard of behavior, even a relatively easy one, we could never be sure we measured up. We would always have to wonder: Am I good enough? Some Christians who do not understand grace still have this fear. Have I done enough? Will God want me? This is exactly the wrong question to ask.

God does have a standard, and it is impossibly high. It is nothing less than absolute perfection. None of us measures up, which is exactly why Jesus came to be our Savior. We could not do it. He could. He did for us what we could not do for ourselves. "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Paul wrote that in Romans also. So we are saved by grace, and grace gives us the assurance we need to

live joyfully. We do not have to be afraid. Christianity is not some heavy burden we must carry if we want eternal life. Rather it is freedom and peace and the assurance that we are children of God and heirs with Christ. And because we are heirs, we have an inheritance in God's kingdom. ... But ... does this assurance come at the price of destroying our motivation to be good? ... It does not.

No one who has experienced God's grace would ask the question, "Why be good?" The answer is too obvious. Because you love God. He has loved you with the kind of love that changes you. It changes how you think, how you feel, how you see yourself. God's love for you is so overwhelming that it leaves you with only two alternatives: You can reject it totally and assert your independence. You say, "I don't need God." And you raise your little flag and put yourself on the throne, and then you live as if you are the center of the universe. Or, you surrender to God's love, and it transforms you. Once you really grasp God's love, those are the only choices. If you haven't been forced to that decision yet, you still have much to learn about God's love.

God's love transforms. It changes us. It changes our motivations. You want to be good because you love God and you are grateful for his grace. This was the answer the Protestant Reformers gave when they revived grace in the preaching of the church. Grace leads to a new heart, which leads to a new life.

"New life" gets us back into our scripture reading, and it is also the reason for this sermon. I am not trying to persuade you to be good, as if I thought the crowd in here this morning is in much danger of running amok with wild living. Yes, we are sinners, but I am confident no one in this room believes we are free to live however we want. I didn't say to myself one day, "I'd better explain this to them, or the next thing you know they'll be looting and pillaging the town." Not at all. You may have wondered if this sermon was going to be nothing but a squirrel chasing expedition. Why be good?! That question may stump a writer who has yet to grapple with what Christians really believe, but it does not stump you.

So why this sermon? Because I want to be sure you see what the woman who wrote that question obviously failed to see. The truth I want you to see is so important to Christianity. It is so helpful for living a joyful Christian life. It is this: **Salvation means a lot more than just life after death. It means new life, right here, right now.** As soon as you put your faith in Jesus Christ, an objective change happens – objective because it is not just a change in how you think and feel; it is a real change outside of you. You enter a covenant relationship with God. He is yours, and you are his. You are holy – "holy" simply means a person or thing belongs to God. You become a new creation. And some ways of living fit this new life, and other ways do not.

Scripture uses different pairs of words to describe the difference Christ makes in your life. Before Christ, you lived according to the flesh. With Christ, you walk by his Spirit.

Before, you were a slave to sin. With Christ, you are a free child of God. Before was the old life, the old you. With Christ, you walk in new life as a new creation. Old/new. Death/life. Slavery/freedom. These are all words the Bible uses to talk about your life here and now. Salvation means leaving the old behind, accepting grace, and starting to live for God.

The woman who asked “Why be good?” made a couple of wrong assumptions. She assumed salvation means going to heaven when you die, and nothing more. So she didn’t take into account new life in Christ here and now. She also seems to think that doing whatever you want is the highest good. Most people in America think that. They think freedom means “I can do whatever I want,” and the more the better. Christians know there is something better than doing whatever I want. We have a word for it: love. To be in right relationship with God and neighbor – to be loved and to love – this is better than getting my own way all the time. If you are inclined to disagree, perhaps you haven’t been loved enough.

The Bible says God created us for relationships. And deep down we know this is true. Relationships can be messy. Family isn’t easy. Marriage isn’t easy. Raising kids isn’t easy. Putting up with other people isn’t easy. We are broken and sinful, so we find relationships difficult. And yet, we cannot help ourselves, can we? We need other people. We need to love and be loved.

I am one of those people who needs alone time. I grew up an only child. I spent years on my own. Plus, I naturally tend to be that way. But I need people. I need my family. I need church. My work as a pastor demands private prayer and study, and I’d probably go crazy without that. It also demands being with people and working with people, and I’m sure I’d go crazy without that. You would too. We need relationships. We were made for them, even the most introverted among us need to love and be loved.

OK, we get that. Now comes the next important step: Sin is behavior that destroys relationships. People who do not understand Christianity assume sin means breaking a rule from a list of arbitrary commandments, as if God just randomly picked behaviors to outlaw. But that’s not true. The truth is, God has a dream for how human life ought to be, and it is beautiful. In God’s dream you are known as you really are, and you are loved. You are loved perfectly, by God and other people. And at the same time, you love them perfectly. That’s how it ought to be. But it’s not, because of sin. We want more. We want to be God. We want to do whatever we want. And our selfishness destroys the dream. Sin, therefore, is anything that destroys the dream, anything that damages relationships.

We see this in Genesis when God expels Adam and Eve from the garden. They broke their relationship of trust and love for God. The next episode of sin was Cain killing his

brother Abel. The point could not be clearer. Look at the Ten Commandments. They are all about relationships, with God or with other people or with society. Christians find all the laws in the Old Testament boring, but they exist for a beautiful purpose: To create a society – ancient Israel – where God was honored, human dignity was honored, people did not exploit one another, and they lived together in right relationship. The prophets railed against the people, why? Because they acted wrongly toward God and their neighbor. There is a reason why Jesus said the whole law could be summed up in two commands: Love God, and love your neighbor.

Sin is the opposite of love. Sin means putting yourself ahead of God or taking the rights, dignity, or property of another person. Sin wrecks the relationships that God intended to sustain us.

Are you beginning to understand why salvation has to be more than life after death? Why grace is not license to do whatever you want? Salvation involves fixing those relationships. It starts with your relationship with God, but it does not stop there. That is why Christianity teaches forgiveness and reconciliation. That is why the Christian life can only be lived in community – with other believers – the church. Your relationships were all messed up. Grace fixes them. Why would you want to go back to breaking them down again?

In our scripture reading, Paul makes it simple. When you become a Christian, you die to sin. Your old self, your selfish self – that was crucified with Christ. Crucified and buried with him in baptism. Then you were raised with him to walk in newness of life. Paul says sin isn't fun. It isn't doing what you want. It is slavery. It is an endless cycle you cannot break. Because you can't break the cycle, the only way out is death. You died with Christ. You were raised with Christ to new life. Right here, right now. You are not the same anymore. You are a new creation. You've been set free.

If you are like me, you hear that and you wonder, "Then why do I still struggle with temptation? How come doing the right thing can be so hard?" The answer is, because you still have residual brokenness inside. God is not finished with you yet. But, you are on your way. The big change has happened. You have turned around. You have your head on straight. You know the difference between life and death, so you want to walk in the way that leads to life. You know what love is, and you want to live it. You know God, so you want to follow his Spirit.

Think of the Christian life as something like the Exodus from Egypt. After they crossed the Red Sea, the Israelites were free. They were not home, yet. They had a long way to go, and along the way they learned how to live as free people – how to live as God's people. They learned what it means to be in a covenant relationship with God. Then at last, God brought them home to the Promised Land.

It is the same for us. After we pass through the waters of baptism and profess faith in Christ, we are free. There is no going back to Egypt. We might grumble and rebel here and there along the way, just as Israel did. But there's no going back to slavery. We have to learn how to live as free people. We have to learn to live the new life. So we stumble along through life ... together ... led by God the whole way ... sustained by God. And at last he brings us all home.

Understand this well: Salvation does not begin when you enter the Promised Land. Salvation starts when you pass through the water to freedom.

God wants you to live in freedom and peace and joy. But to do that you must experience grace, and you must understand what sin really is and why it is bad. And you must decide that the highest good is love, not getting what you want all the time. And you must realize that God is the center of the universe, not you.

I saw a television sit-com years ago, and this particular episode was making fun of Christians. The church was a caricature. Imagine a judgmental kind of place where chewing gum and giggling are condemned with prophetic zeal. I think the point the producers were trying to make was: Anyone who tells you how you ought to live is a petty, mean-spirited hypocrite. You have probably seen Christianity caricatured this way in television or movies. It's pretty standard. Either they don't know what Christians really believe or they don't care. Anyway, I was watching this show, and I noticed something. I did not recognize the church I knew in their portrayal. The show didn't ring true.

I've been around a lot of churches, and being a pastor, I've seen the inner workings. I know more dirt than most. I have seen Christians act petty. I've known a few who were legalistic. Honestly, I've known a few who I think did not enjoy life very much. For some reason they were unhappy, and they wanted to share their misery with others. I've seen all that. We Christians are human beings like everyone else. The only difference is, we're forgiven. That's grace, again. Yet despite my intimate knowledge of the weaknesses of Christians and the church, I did not recognize any church I knew in that show. It was a hollow caricature.

The church I know is full of odd characters and broken people, but they understand grace. They try to be good and do what's right, because they know what's at stake. And they love God. And they want to love their neighbors. It would be easier if their neighbors were more lovable, but they give it a shot anyway.

The church I know is full of joyful, resilient people. They share one another's burdens and sorrows. Sometimes not well, but even then their heart is usually in the right place.

The church I know will disapprove and gossip discretely if you make a royal mess of your life, but they will be there for you when you want to straighten it out again. And they'll help if they are able. Because deep down they love you and want what's best for you. They know there is a right way and a wrong way, so they can't just approve of anything and everything. But they are good at giving second chances.

The church I know is like a beautiful woman. Some women are beautiful not in spite of flaws in their features but because of them. I think the church is like that. The imperfections are there, but she is beautiful. What makes her beautiful is grace. The grace God gives us. The grace we live when we walk in newness of life.

Why be good? I hope that critic I read finds her answer. I know I've found it, and I trust you have too.

Salvation means a lot more than just life after death. It means new life, right here, right now. Amen.

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