

Why do you call me good?

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When I was a kid, I was often puzzled by the way Jesus responded to people in the Gospels. From callously telling someone to “let the dead bury their own dead” to calling a Samaritan woman a dog to saying that he didn’t come to bring peace but a sword, Jesus often seemed a bit obnoxious (at worst) and enigmatic (at best).

One such vexing encounter in the Gospels that irritated me as a kid was Jesus’ response to the rich young ruler in Luke 18. The conversation starts innocently enough:

Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?

A perfectly reasonable question to ask of someone like Jesus, one would think, and a decently polite way of putting it. But Jesus’ response begins in typically exasperating fashion:

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

Well, seriously Jesus. Give the guy a break! He’s just trying to open up a conversation! Can’t you take a compliment?! And what’s with this “No one is good but God” business. Not to put too fine (or Trinitarian) a point on it, but you kinda *are* God. And if we can’t call *you* good, then who exactly *can* we call good? Throw the poor guy a bone, for pity’s sake!

With the benefit of a few more years lived on the planet—a few more interactions with a few more people over longer periods of time, a few more opportunities to scrutinize my own cocktail of motivations and moral conduct in diverse circumstances—I now see Jesus’ encounter with the young ruler a bit differently. In an analogous way to Jesus’ baptism by John being less about repentance for sin than about symbolically aligning and identifying himself with fragile and fallen humanity, so perhaps this encounter is Jesus is making a broader statement about the complicated nature of all human declarations and performances of goodness.

I am convinced that Jesus sees and understands the human heart like no one else. He knows that our goodness is always conflicted, always self-interested, always at least *partially* about us. This was certainly the case of the rich young ruler who was looking for a cost-free way to preserve his wealth while procuring some eternal goodies. But it's true in less obvious ways, too. We use the language of good and bad all the time, but we rarely bother to probe these terms as deeply as we ought to. Chief among our problems when it comes to goodness is that we simply cannot subtract ourselves from our attempts to *be good* or to *evaluate* goodness. We cannot help but construe the world in categories that are neat and clean and decisive, often understanding ourselves as virtuous and those who don't share our views as misguided or ignorant or wicked.

Jesus knows that this is not how goodness works in the world, that it is not how *we* work in the world, that the human heart has never been quite so tidy. Jesus knew full well the truth of the prophet Jeremiah's words:

The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?

This, I am convinced, is at least part of the reason why Jesus balks at this young man's casual affixation of "good" language. Jesus knows that the human soul is a far murkier thing than the binary and often self-congratulatory terms we so easily throw around.

So what then? Are we not permitted to speak of goodness and badness without endlessly qualifying our terms, losing ourselves and our language in morass of helpless gray? I don't think so. But I am convinced that at the very least we have to become more a bit more self-aware and self-critical in how we think about ourselves and a bit more nuanced in our public discourse.

One discipline that I have tried to adopt recently comes in the form of a series of questions. I try to ask these of myself whenever I'm having an instinctive reaction to any controversial issue where people of a wide range of perspectives are lining up the good guys and the bad guys, or when negative emotions begin to boil up in me in response to all those "wrong" people, or when I am tempted toward a kind of tribalistic cheerleading for those who represent what I think about this or that issue. These questions are little more than an attempt to be at least *somewhat* critical of my own views and my own responses in the midst of contentious situations where

“good” and “bad” language and assumptions are flying around. They are very simple questions but I am increasingly convinced, very important ones in our polarized and polarizing times:

- *Why do I want this to be true of God or the world?*
- *What need is this feeding in me?*
- *What aspect of my own identity is my reaction reinforcing?*
- *What sense of belonging in a club is it bolstering?*

These questions do not represent some magical panacea that will resolve complex issues and relationships. They aren't a substitute for hard thinking and difficult conversations. But at minimum, they force me to take a few vital steps back from my own real or imagined goodness or rightness and make the rather basic admission that I very often like the *idea* of being good (and being seen as good) quite a lot more than I do the goodness itself. I suspect I am not alone.

“Why do you call me good?” Perhaps in asking this question Jesus is inviting us to hold a mirror up to ourselves and ask the question, “Why do *you* imagine *yourself* to be good?” The question is a safeguard against the idolatry we are so prone to. It is so easy to make gods in our own image and we do it with cheerful (and often oblivious) regularity. It's just as easy to make *good* in our own image.

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