

Is Being Good Good Enough?

It's a symptom of our sinful condition that we tend to believe that God's requirements for our lives are less than they really are. By the time of Jesus, many first century Jewish leaders had lessened the demands of the Law to something that they believed that they could do in and of themselves. Some of the rabbis taught that the requirement of obedience to God's Law was external obedience only. For example, as long as I don't murder anyone or commit adultery, I can be right with God. But Jesus taught something entirely different which dealt with the internal, root causes of our sin. "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder...but I say whoever is angry with his brother will be liable to judgement....You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery. But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart'" (Matthew 5:21-22; 27-28). Jesus taught that God's standards for righteousness are nothing less than perfection in thought, word and deed every moment of our lives (Mt. 5:48). That is an impossible standard for sinful humanity to meet.

Another example of this false teaching that God's standard of righteousness is external only is recorded in the synoptic gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. There was a young, Jewish man, who came to Jesus and asked him this question? "What good deed must I do to have eternal life?" Jesus responds, "If you want to have eternal life, you must keep the commandments." Now, to help us understand what is being said here, Jesus knows that no ordinary man can keep the commandments perfectly as God requires. He is seeking to point this young man to the reality of how far short he falls of keeping God's standard. Jesus gives this man a representative list of the law including five commandments from the second half of the Decalogue plus the second of the two greatest commandments. "Which ones?" the young man asks. Jesus replies, "You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself." The young man replies, "I've kept every one of these. What more do I lack?"

The teaching that this young man had received up to this point in his life, whether implicitly or explicitly, was that external obedience was all that was required for eternal life. Jesus' response is penetrating and it gets to the very heart of what this young man valued and worshipped. "Go and sell everything that you have and give it to the poor and come and follow me." And the text says that, "When the young man heard this, he went away sorrowful, for he

had great possessions.” Jesus was not teaching that giving all that you have to the poor is the path to eternal life. He was calling attention to the fact that this young man was unwilling to give up what was the most important thing to him, his ‘great possessions.’ This rich, young man could not even keep the first commandment, “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3). This man’s money was his god. It was in his wealth that he placed his trust.

The Bible teaches that the obedience of all mankind since the Fall of Adam fails to meet God’s perfect standard. In fact, every act of our obedience is always tainted by our innate sinfulness. That is why the belief that we could ever do more ‘good deeds’ than ‘bad deeds’ fails every biblical test. We have no innate good deeds to offer God. What is the answer that the Bible gives to our dilemma? Anyone who desires eternal life must give up trying to be acceptable with God by what we do. We must confess our sins and trust in the righteousness of Jesus Christ alone, the perfect sinless Son of God (1 Peter 2:22). When it comes to our own innate obedience, being good is never good enough to meet God’s perfect standard.

Rev. Dr. Steve Jones is the pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church PCA in Paxton, Illinois