

## **GOD LEADS US IN WHAT IS RIGHT**

**a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, Jan. 31, 2016**

**Based on Psalm 25:4, 8-10; Jeremiah 31:31-33, John 16:13, II Peter 1:3-4**

Can people be good without God? Some folks today claim that we don't need God or faith or churches; human beings can live perfectly good lives without religion at all. In fact, some forms of religion can cause people to do bad things. Can people be good, or even better, without God? This is a central issue we will be considering this morning.

The sermon today is the fourth in a sermon series entitled, "Ten Truths that Change Life." So far we have considered three key truths of the Bible: concerning our identity—that we are created by God in the image of God—concerning our fundamental human problem—that we have alienated ourselves from God, in a condition that the Bible calls sin—and concerning the nature of God—that God is one and, above all, God is good. Today we will be looking at whether and how people can be good—the whole realm of human morality. Let us begin with a moment of prayer-

If you study human cultures, you quickly realize that there is among human beings a universal idea of the good. Not only is it the case that everyone, everywhere, in every time has had a sense of right and wrong, but everyone, everywhere, in every time has agreed on many of the specifics about what exactly is right and what is wrong. For example, there is and has been universal human agreement on the sixth commandment of the ten commandments—thou shalt not murder (as it is expressed literally in the Hebrew), and there is also agreement on the seventh commandment against adultery and the eighth commandment against stealing and the ninth commandment against dishonesty, and you could keep the list going across numerous moral principles. This universal moral law—this detailed sense of right and wrong that we find in everyone—points clearly to the reality of God. If there is no God, where do all these universal moral principles come from—these consistent principles that we find in all different cultures across the ages? Atheists have made attempts to explain the phenomenon but have come well short. The moral awareness of human beings only makes sense when we acknowledge what we have seen in previous weeks—There is a good God reigning over all, and God has created us in his image, which means that God has given us the idea of the good—God has implanted within human beings a universal sense of right and wrong.

But there is also another force at work among human beings—our tendency to fall into sin. We noted earlier in this sermon series how the story of Adam and Eve illuminates the nature of sin—that sin, in its essence, is the attempt to be "like God"—not "like God" in goodness, but like God in power. In the story, the fundamental temptation is, "If you eat the fruit of this tree, you will be like God, knowing good and evil." (Genesis 3:5) This verse is often misunderstood, as people want to take it to mean

that Adam and Eve did not understand good and evil until they disobeyed God. But that makes no sense, since in the story they obviously knew before the temptation that it would be wrong to disobey God and it would be right to follow God. People are created by God with a built-in awareness of right and wrong. The Genesis verse makes sense when we realize that the original Hebrew translated as “knowing good and evil” means to discern what is good and what is evil and to participate in good or evil. In other words, the basic temptation is to make ourselves like God in the sense that we decide what is good or evil—we call the shots—and do whatever we want, no matter what God says.

So there is a fundamental tension between our God-given sense of what is right and our sinful tendency to go our own way contrary to God. The result is that even as people may know deep down what is right, they often choose to do what is wrong, and at least for a while will convince themselves that what they are doing is not really wrong.

In the past few years there has been a stunning series of scandals in the business world. Major banks have been paying huge fines because they were cheating and deceiving clients in multiple ways. The leaders of FIFA, the world soccer organization, have been charged with a long history of bribes and kickbacks. And most recently, Volkswagen has been forced to admit that the company intentionally rigged its diesel cars so as to give false information to customers and break government pollution rules. Surely all these corporate leaders knew that what they were doing was morally wrong. But all these cases illustrate our enormous human capacity to justify our actions to ourselves. We convince ourselves that somehow we deserve the benefit we are getting through our actions, that what we are doing is not really hurting anyone, and that in the end it is somehow O.K. Thus the moral awareness that comes to us from God becomes filtered through our own sinful tendencies, so that what emerges in the end is a distorted morality that is fitted to our own preferences.

There are a variety of ways in which people will water down or twist the sense of right and wrong that God gives us. One of the most common ways in which people do this is that they acknowledge God-given principles of right living but then narrow the field of how they apply. Consider, for example, the interesting history of what people have done with the widely recognized principle, Thou shalt not murder.

Every culture in human history has agreed with this principle; but to whom does it apply? Human beings through the ages have wanted to say that what this principle means is: You shall not kill anyone . . . in your own clan, or in your own tribe, or in your own nation, or in your own religion; but it is perfectly all right to kill someone in that other clan or that other tribe or that other nation or that other religion. People convince themselves that those other people are somehow less than truly human and not worthy of moral treatment, and the reason they convince themselves of that is because in their sinfulness they want to exalt themselves over those others. Thus they shrink the neighborhood of who qualifies as a neighbor, so that they can treat some people according to moral principles and others not. We see the most glaring example of this

today in the so-called Islamic state terrorists, who have shrunk their neighborhood very small, so that they can treat most of the world with brutality.

Jesus met this age-old human tendency head-on. He said that the greatest commandments were to love God and love our neighbor, and when a man asked, “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus told the parable of the good Samaritan—a story about a Samaritan man who gives extraordinary help to an injured Jewish man. In other words, it is a story about a man showing compassionate care to someone of another ethnic group and another religion, a man who reaches across barriers of hatred and distrust with love. Who is my neighbor? Through the parable Jesus expands the neighborhood and says that our neighborhood includes everyone. Jesus hammers the point home in the Sermon on the Mount when he says, “Love your enemies.” (Matthew 5:44)

We see the same pattern in all of Jesus’ moral teachings—that while human beings perpetually want to lower the bar when it comes to what is called for in moral living (in order to come up with a morality to their own liking), Jesus raises the bar—Jesus expands the picture of morality to the full and real measure of what is good. People in Jesus’ day wanted to think that following a decent, law-abiding life was the measure of goodness; Jesus called them to give of themselves to the poor, to the sick, and to the outcast. People wanted to think that throwing a bit of what they had in the temple offering was an adequate measure of giving; Jesus pointed to a widow who gave all of what she had. People wanted to think that they could limit their help to those who were worthy of it; Jesus called people to forgive and embrace even those who had seriously sinned.

In all this it becomes clear why human beings will never achieve authentic goodness on their own. It is because our human sinfulness clouds and distorts our vision of what is good. We may have a God-given capacity to recognize right and wrong, but in our sinfulness we continually want to truncate and manipulate all the principles of morality so as to fit our preferences and our desires. We end up following our own definition of goodness, which is far less than what we are called to be.

In order for human beings to genuinely be good, there are two things that are plainly needed. First, we need to catch God’s vision of goodness. We need to get past our own blurred moral vision in order to clearly perceive God’s principles. So the Psalmist said in the passage we heard, “Show me, O Lord, your ways.” (Psalm 25:4) This is exactly what God does throughout the Old Testament, as God plainly reveals God’s laws to the people of Israel; and then God shows us perfectly what is right in Jesus Christ.

Last week we saw how Jesus is the perfectly clear picture of what God is like, how God is good. While human beings through the ages have imagined all sorts of things about God, God reveals to us in Jesus the real nature of God as just, caring, and compassionate. This morning we can note how Jesus is also the perfectly clear picture of how we are to live. While human beings in their sinfulness have fallen into all sorts of

flawed ideas and patterns of behavior, God shows us in Jesus what a genuinely good life is.

But the problem is not only in our understanding, the problem even more is in our hearts; so we need more than a clear perception of how we should live. We need an interior renewal of our spirit, so that we are motivated and enabled to live rightly. The prophet Jeremiah addressed this need when he said that “God would write his law in our hearts.” (Jeremiah 33:33) God promises to work within us so that we not only know what is right, but we desire to do what is right, and are empowered to live in God’s ways.

This promise comes to its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Jesus answers our fundamental problem of sin by reconciling us to God, for it is only when we are forgiven and brought into a right relationship with God that we can even begin to live a genuinely good life; and as we are brought into fellowship with God, Jesus fills us with the Holy Spirit, so as to write God’s law in our hearts—to inspire and guide us in God’s ways. In Jesus we find forgiveness for when we stumble and fall short of God’s call, and through his Holy Spirit we find empowerment to finally live the lives of authentic goodness into which God calls us. As Jesus said, “The Holy Spirit will guide you into all truth,” (John 16:13) and the apostle Peter added, “His divine power gives us everything needed for life and godliness . . . so that you may escape from the corruption that is in the world and may become participants in the divine nature. [II Peter 1:3-4]

Can people be good without God? On a simple, practical level we could say that, yes, it is certainly possible for an atheist to do good. But on a deeper, more comprehensive level we have to say that human beings cannot be good without God. The only way that people are good in the first place is because they have a built-in sense of the good which is given to them by God, and so when people do good, they are acting on their God-given moral sense even if they do not acknowledge God in the process. People may imagine they are being good without God, but in fact they are using their moral capacity which was created in them by God.

But beyond this, we see what regularly happens with human morality—that although God has implanted a basic moral awareness in the human heart, human beings wander off in their sinfulness and easily create their own lesser moral rules. The result is that throughout history the values in human societies have been all over the place. What about cannibal values, or Nazi values, or mafia values? Each of those groups, by the way, followed their own version of the principle, “Thou shalt not murder.” In the mafia you don’t kill members of your own family, in cannibalism you don’t eat people in your own tribe, and among the Nazis you don’t slaughter human beings in your own ethnic group. All these people imagined that they were living rightly. Different groups of people have come up with widely differing definitions of what is good; so if someone says, “I can be good without God,” the first question we need to ask is, “What exactly do you mean by good?” The fact is that without a genuine connection to God,

people can come up with very distorted and very imperfect notions of what constitutes a good life; and unless we can appeal to a higher moral authority of God, there finally is no particular reason for us to define any set of values as inherently better than another. Without God, we cannot even clearly define what is good; and then we have a far larger issue when it comes to living the good. Even when people catch a glimpse of what real goodness looks like, without God, they have a very hard time actually doing it. All this is why the world is such a mess today.

The clear truth declared in the Bible is that it is in God that human beings can know what is good and finally be enabled to do what is good. Goodness originates in God—as the Psalmist put it, “Good and upright is the Lord” (Psalm 25:8)—and God will bring each of us into an authentically good life when we are open to how God will work within us. As the Psalmist said, “God leads the humble in what is right.” (Psalm 25:9) In a world that is full of so much confusion and so much wrong, we can find and journey on the right path when we look to God in faith, when we are receptive to how God through Christ would work in our hearts, and when we join, by the power of God’s Spirit, to share in the goodness of God.