

**“Why Do Good?”**  
a sermon  
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Galatians 6:7–16

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I’m going to go out on a limb here, and suppose something about your experience. I believe I’m right, but if I’m not, well, work with me for a little bit! And here it is: When we read the Bible, very often we feel this tremendous distance between its world and our world. Does that sound right to you? A little?

Well, maybe speaking only for myself, but it seems that not only the language but the assumptions of the Biblical authors are so alien to us. The people that inhabit the Bible are different, so different from us that we have to work at understanding what they were about. I think this is one reason why the Bible strikes us as difficult to understand, and why, sadly, so many give up on reading the Bible.

I think that is too bad. For there are plenty of times when that alien world of the Bible, once I’ve spent a little time trying to understand it, to hear it on its own terms, once I’ve perhaps asked someone for a little help in making that world and its assumptions a little clearer, that I see it is not so distant from the world I inhabit. In fact, sometimes the world of the Bible and my world seem very close — surprisingly close, in fact.

This happens most times when I look at the challenges the heroes and saints of the Bible faced. And as I probe those challenges, I find that in them and with them were assumptions, attitudes, dispositions and opinions. It was against these, very often, that the saints of the Bible struggled, just as they struggled against enemies and tyrants.

Now, that shouldn’t seem so surprising. It makes sense that there would be some assumptions and attitudes underlying the controversies and challenges in the Bible. But here’s the thing: when I look at those assumptions and attitudes, very often I find myself recognizing them; I see them as very similar to assumptions and attitudes that are common in modern day life. It is then that the distance between our world and the world of the Bible appears to shrink appreciably.

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The same is the case, I believe, with the passage I read a few minutes ago.

It is, I admit, not an easy passage to understand, especially with someone reading it to you just once, as I just did.

That’s often the case with the apostle Paul. With many of the things he wrote, we might easily wonder, “What is he talking about?” He speaks at length, with a variety of metaphors that we don’t completely understand, with strange turns of phrase that turn out to be puns that make sense only in Greek. And then there’s the fact that these are letters addressed to particular people with particular problems, but we have to guess from what Paul says to them what the problems are. Or he is answering questions they have put to him, but we have to guess what the question is. It’s like listening to one side of a phone conversation. Lucky us.

The same is true with this passage. Here, Paul is addressing attitudes and assumptions that are, really, not so foreign to us.

It seems that there were two assumptions, and they were very different from each other. In fact, they were opposed to each other. Paul's friends in Galatia were struggling with two different understandings of Christian faith, two very contradictory and opposed assumptions. They were the attitudes of different camps that wanted to dominate the Christians in Galatia.

One assumption was that true Christians needed to follow very specific rules, and they needed to follow them to the letter. Those who held this assumption believed that Jesus was important, but what you needed was Jesus *plus* the Old Testament law, all of it, including circumcision for men, including all the dietary legislation.

Now, maybe some of that doesn't sound so familiar. But I think that what we have with that group of law-oriented Christians was a kind of religious perfectionism. It was joined with a suspicion that, really, as good as it was, the work of Christ was not enough, but must be supplemented by what *I* do. In this way of looking at things, Jesus is an important part of salvation, but what he does had to be completed by my own stuff.

I think that sounds familiar. For I find Christians who have a truly perfectionistic understanding of Christianity. You have to follow the rules. You have to avoid cigarettes and alcohol. And please, no tattoos. You must vote for the right party. You must listen to the right music. You have to hang around with the right people. You can't slip up, in speech, in thought, in matters sexual or cultural.

And really, I think there are plenty of non-Christians who have this attitude, too. *They* think, too, that either Christians must be perfect, or they must be hypocrites; that the model Christian is the one who speaks, thinks, votes, or otherwise acts in a certain, very narrowly defined way.

That was one assumption Paul had to contend with. And as I said, there was another assumption Paul had to battle, one diametrically opposed to the first. And this was the idea that it didn't matter *at all* what Christians did, that they could do whatever in the world they wanted to do:

say what they wanted; eat and drink whatever they wanted in whatever quantity they wanted; have intimate relations with whomever they wanted, whenever they wanted.

Nothing mattered, they believed, because Christ had saved them. Morality was a thing of the past; Jesus has freed us from such petty concerns. We are saved by the work of Christ, not by our own work. So it doesn't matter at all, these people said, what we did or did not do. It was all taken care of.

And this, too, sounds familiar to me. I find that there are Christians today who take a similar morally ambiguous stance, who seem to think that it doesn't matter at all what you do, that Lennon and McCartney were right — "All you need is love," that there are no spiritual consequences to your poor moral choices, indeed, that there *are* no poor moral choices, for morality is simply a matter of personal preference.

It was against each of these attitudes that Paul had to do some firm correcting with his friends in Galatia. For neither of them were right, not really, not entirely, even as there might be a little truth in each of them. He had to speak to his friends, who found themselves puzzled and challenged by these two very different takes on the Christian life.

And so what Paul is getting at in these verses is, at its core, an answer that points to a question, *this* question, in fact: “Why do good?” It is that question — “why do good?” — that sums up the dilemma the Galatians struggled to address, the existential and religious puzzle they labored to solve.

Why do good? If it’s Jesus who saves us and not we who do the saving, then it can’t be that we do good so we may save ourselves. The things we do, the rules we follow, will not save us. No one’s good works are sufficient. Only Jesus can provide what is sufficient.

Why do good? If God is holy and just, then it can’t be that doing good doesn’t matter at all, that we can do anything at all and God won’t care. If God is righteous, then it can’t be true that followers of Christ are given an absolute pass on the things they do. Of course God will care. “God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow.”

Why do good? The reason, Paul suggests, is this: because in the end we will stand before God, and God will show each of us the life we lived. God will ask us about the things we’ve done. And that could be a difficult time we have with God, as we struggle to answer God’s questions.

*“I have given you time. What have you done with it?”*

Sorry, God. I wasted it on the frivolous and the selfish.

*“I gave you wealth. What did you do with it?”*

Sorry, God. I spent it for my own comfort and entertainment.

*“I gave you neighbors. What did you do for them?”*

Um... wait, I had neighbors?

Again: Why do good? Paul places this all in the context of God’s *judgment*, as if to call us to the seriousness of these matters, to shake us up a bit, to put into us, really, the fear of God. For a little fear, when it comes to doing good, may be the right antidote to a moral complacency that takes the grace of Christ for granted.

You see, we can’t rely on our good deeds to make us right with God. Only Jesus can do that. Only the work of Christ can make us able to stand before God and survive, at the end. But we can’t presume upon that grace and be so flippant about our behavior. Even though we are embraced by the love of Christ, we still will have to answer for what we have done.

But for Paul, really, it’s not just about fear. Because the God whom we should fear is not only holy and just. This God is also loving and gracious and merciful. So doing good is not just about fear. It’s about love. It’s about gratitude. It’s about wanting your life to have lasting value. It’s about living as a *follower* of Jesus and not merely as his patient. It’s about being a *disciple* of Jesus, and not merely his rescued soul. Jesus wants obedience, not just gratitude. Jesus wants you to see him not only as your Savior but also as your

Lord, not only as the one who rescues your life but also as the one who from then on determines your life.

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I named the assumptions Paul was countering. Paul, too, has an assumption, one that may be awkward and uncomfortable: if you're saved by the work of Jesus Christ and not by your own efforts, then there will be evidence in your life that you are being saved. Your moral choices will reflect the love of Christ that you have accepted and received. You will love, because Jesus has loved you. You will be generous because God has been generous to you and will be on the last day, when you stand before God and you are asked, "So, what did you do with the life I gave you?"

I think it would great to have a good answer to that question.

I'll say it again: if you're saved by Christ's work and not your own, then there will be evidence in your life that you are being saved. It may not happen all at once. But it will be happening. There will be change and growth of the good and decay of the bad, perhaps slow, very slow indeed, but it will be there, in your life story, in the measure of your moments.

Do you have such evidence, in your own life? Is your faith in Christ making a difference in how you act? Are your desire and your ability to do good growing? Do you have reason to suspect that the Holy Spirit is at work within you?

However you answer these questions, whether it be "yes" or "no" or "I don't know," it seems to me that the fitting response is prayer: whether for the grace you have received, or for the mercy you have yet to accept, either a prayer of thanksgiving, or a prayer that cries out, "Save me, Lord Jesus."

So, I challenge you: look for opportunities to do good, while there is time to do good. Be eager to act with Christ-like love and God-honoring compassion. And pray for the Spirit's blessing, so you may more fully know the grace of Jesus Christ and be able to do the good he wills.