

PRESENTING THE GOSPEL TO “THE GOOD MORAL MAN”

Virgil Warren, PhD

What do you do with a man like “Bob”? He really is a “good guy.” A happy, outgoing person that is glad to see you and always willing to stop and talk. Several years ago he quit a good-paying job so he could spend more time working with his only son, who became a successful race-car driver in our part of the country. One day he told me, *“When I was a kid, my dad never had any time to do things with me. I’m not going to be that way with ‘Earl.’”* I don’t know that I ever heard him use a “cuss” word. He gets along well with his wife . . . As far as Christ is concerned, what do you do with a man like “Bob”?

It is hard to give one answer to questions about good moral people because there is more than one kind of them. There are gracious, considerate people who do not claim adherence to any “organized religion.” Some show up in other world religions. There are nominal Christians who were taken to church once in a while as kids. They would call themselves Christians rather than disbelievers or Buddhists; but they do not participate in the community of Christ, they do not have a sense of personal relationship with him, and they do not deliberately contribute to his purposes in the world.

The following presentation recommends a respectful approach to people like them: begin with what they can see going on in human relationships and transfer it to relationship with God. The suggestion implies that the two situations are basically alike. It reflects the conviction that Christianity is chiefly concerned with persons in relationship. The approach brings these convictions to bear on the gospel and “the good moral man.”

What Salvation Is

Salvation is often a religious word good people overhear. It vaguely suggests going to “heaven,” and going to heaven has something to do with being good. Good people think of “heaven” as connected with being decent.

But heaven comes from friendship with God, and salvation is not particularly from hell, but from alienation. So it is not just a future reward; it is a present relationship. Goodness comes into the picture because how we act affects how we get along with others; but it is not just goodness for its own sake or goodness for reward. It is goodness for relationship. Goodness with God expresses itself in obedience, worship, and service.

Doing good things does not make people other people’s friends unless they do those things “toward” those people. Similarly, good people do not become God’s friends if they are not

the one their actions are “talking to.” Far from depreciating people’s good lives, we encourage them to redirect their good lives toward God.

What Goodness Is

Not only are people unclear about what salvation is, what heaven is, and how the two relate to being good. They also misunderstand what goodness is and how it is measured. Reflecting on how we live with other people shows two important things about goodness. The first is that goodness is perfect goodness.

All friendships operate on a perfection standard, or they would not be operating on a standard at all. Yes, no one lives up to it; but since there is a standard, it calls for full compliance. Failures are failures relative to everything in the standard, or people would not even call them failures. We are not being extremist here. Conscience demonstrates the point because it operates on a perfection standard as well. Conscience bothers us each time we break any element in the standard—until we override it enough to desensitize it, but that is another matter.

Although we appreciate each other’s good qualities, we should not overdo how good any of us are. Good people have certain traits that foster a favorable impression of them. Their virtues across the board, however, are not actually so ideal. They may “give you the shirt off their back,” but they may also lose their temper when you do not treat them like they want. Like most of us, they exhibit a curious combination of strengths and weaknesses. Since good people admit they are not perfect, we remove their goodness as a stumbling block to faith when we point out that goodness is perfection.

Good people themselves probably do not think much about whether they are good. They feel good about themselves, but they do so because their subconscious standards are not as high as they could be. There are worse people around, and any critic that comes along has faults too. Their standard is being better than average people; so good means relatively good, even predominantly good, good *“for all practical purposes.”* It means living up to “the laws of the land,” the legal minimums society has.

There is more to goodness, though, than these necessary things. We make a common mistake if we differentiate between good and perfect. Admittedly, “nobody’s perfect.” Without the good-perfect distinction, nobody’s even good. Nobody wants to live with that verdict. We make the good-perfect distinction so that striving for perfection does not drive us crazy. We change the standard to keep from feeling overwhelmed by it. But the distinction between good and perfect is for practical purposes. We must first talk about theory; otherwise, the distinction becomes an excuse.

When Jesus talked about exceeding the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, he was not talking about a greater degree of their righteousness, but another kind of it. A person could

hardly be more rule-and-regulation righteous than Pharisees tried to be. Goodness is more than something we can attach a percentage to; it is an art that keeps improving. When thought of as degree, goodness is perfection; when thought of as kind, it is maturity.

More subtle sins of attitude, feelings, thoughts, and motives must not be overlooked. Good people may not think about sins of omission or discount “higher” moral responsibilities like helping make other people better or avoiding behaviors that mislead weaker people. Like the rich young ruler, good people may really be likable. As items of social convention, they have “*kept the commandments*” all their lives, but they cannot readily let go of possessions to serve a cause bigger than themselves (cp. Luke 18:18-23). They think about goodness as good *vs.* bad more than good *vs.* better. Loving enemies and returning good in return for evil are a bit much. Should they have the goodness of Job, they are still not “out of the woods.” In their mind they can overdo that fact and make themselves vulnerable to being satisfied even proud.

Goodness in the sense of maturity involves even more than these “higher” standards; it involves higher and higher standards. God’s expectation rises as maturity grows. That feature of the external standard has a parallel in the internal one. In the words of C. S. Lewis, “*The more you obey your conscience, the more your conscience will demand of you.*”¹ We can fail at the higher responsibilities and the rising responsibilities, which means lack of perfect maturity. Especially with relativity factored in, the idea that any of us are good starts looking naïve. As old Johnny Mulligan used to tell us “pilers” in the Cincinnati A & P warehouse, “*Don’t ever get the idea you’re done.*” Let’s not ever get the idea we’re good.

The standard for goodness is perfect maturity. Instead of changing the standard or re-defining what it is, we “make up the difference” between performance and perfection. That leads to the next point.

Another mistake we make is overlooking the crucial role other people have in our own goodness. We do not mean the other person’s role in helping us be better people. That comes later. Here we are highlighting the fact that there would be no relationship were it not for other people’s forgiveness. It amounts to saying that goodness is not so decisively in us as it is in “*the eyes of the beholder.*” What a relief that is for the majority of us who are not all that morally beautiful! In biblical wording, righteousness is always “reckoned” to us. That is true whether the other persons are human or divine. Among friends and relatives, we do it so naturally that we do not even notice we are doing it. But we must not overlook something so important just because it has become second nature to us. We have to bring it to mind to help us understand relating to God and put goodness in its place. Forgiveness makes up the difference between performance and perfection.

Fortunately, in friendships, being viewed as good is even more important than being good. The standard is not in the abstract but in the other person. The first person’s behavior is not

just a pattern of behavior but a pattern of behavior toward the other person. When one does his goodness toward the other, the other overlooks its deficiencies and views him as good. And for all practical purposes he is good, but the unattainable standard goes unchanged. “For all practical purposes” means for relationship purposes.

Consequently, a second, related point about goodness is that goodness is interpersonal. In Paul’s terms, righteousness (goodness) is not (the result) of (my) works, but of (other people’s) grace. I trust (faith) that they will be gracious, and life together (salvation) goes on.

Salvation involves a four-part series: the basis for being considered righteous, being considered righteous, the consequent fellowship, and the resulting blessings. If we really were righteous—perfect, the series would be intact because other people would see us as perfect, relate to us, and do things for us as occasion arose. But if “nobody’s perfect,” we are not considered perfect, not friends, and not benefited. So besides being good there must be some other basis for being considered good, or none of us would have any friends.

Everyday human associations illustrate again how this works. In place of being perfect, other people substitute an appropriate condition for viewing us as perfect anyway, and we have to trust them to do that. In one way or another, that condition amounts to “identification” with those other persons, commitment to them. If those who do wrong will re-identify themselves with the ones they have wronged, the other people can forgive, restore fellowship, and resume the benefits of life together. We hasten to add that identification involves the most inclusive thing there is about people—their very selves. It is not something simple, easy, or offhanded. Identification is an intentional, complex experience that includes being sorry, renewing commitment to other people’s expectations, committing to them as persons, continuing to be involved with them, acting as a friend toward them, having a sense of being at one with them, and the like.

Our own wisdom says not only that “to err is human,” but that “to forgive is divine.” But if goodness were simply one person’s behavior relative to some standard, there would be no one else in the picture. In no relationship do people just do good and end up with a friend somewhere. They need to direct their goodness toward their friends, who overlook and forgive any shortcomings.

Applying these principles to human-divine associations requires some adjustments and additions. For one thing, association with God is not between equals. We do not work out the values together; he establishes them for us. This relationship includes not only the rules of the relationship, but his purposes of service by us. Both kinds of expectancies God determines by right of creatorship, superior nature, and previous grace to us all (Matthew 5:45). Identifying with God includes all the aspects listed earlier plus allegiance and service. So, goodness before

God is not mere morality defined by an impersonal code; goodness is behaviors called for by him, done toward him, and aimed at accomplishing his purposes.

For another thing, this relationship has what looks like a “third party.” But Christ is really an extension of the other side of the relationship. He is not so much a third party as a manifestation of the second party. He and the Father are one in an interpersonal sense. They share the same nature, stand for the same values, have the same purposes, and work together to fulfill them. They are one in nature, action, relationship, and purpose. Through incarnation God in the person of Christ made visible the other side of the relationship to make it easier for us to identify with him and commit to him. In addition, as a man he carried out in our arena the ideal life God calls us all to lead. He voluntarily carried that obedience to the point of torturous death, and did it for our benefit, not his. In doing so, he did more than demonstrate human righteousness. He became the only case of it while facing temptations greater than ours.

The Father’s appropriate condition for viewing us as good is our willingness to commit ourselves to him by committing ourselves to Christ who is at one with him. We trust God’s promise to view us as good on the condition that we commit ourselves to Christ-plus-the-Father who is good. We trust that Christ is the manifestation of the other side of the relationship.

These distinctives in human-divine relationship add to what is always involved in renewing and maintaining any purposeful relationship. Human interactions do not show us everything about human-divine ones, but our social experience enables us to see that being reconciled to God by being good is an idea that does not bear up under examination. Good moral people need the very thing we all need: perfection more than predominant goodness, reckoned goodness on the condition of commitment to Christ, and service to God in addition to morality alone.

There are four reasons we cannot have goodness on our own. First, there is the perfection standard, which when broken cannot be regained—and we have all broken it. Second, forgiveness is done by the other person, and forgiveness cannot be forced. Third, relationship calls for identification with the other person. By sinning at all, we have identified with “Adam,” a lost group, and we cannot avoid sharing its destiny as long as we are in it. Finally, we need other people to help us overcome our faults and weaknesses, and grow in goodness.² To put it differently, these are four reasons good moral people cannot save themselves.

The gospel addresses good people even though they live better than many Christians. Christ has as much to say to good moral people as he does to the worst people. We need not feel arrogant in talking to our betters about salvation from their sin, because being good is not a matter of being “better than thou.” It is a relationship based on being viewed as perfect. With these points clarified, we are less likely to come off as superiors trying to bring other people up to our level. We are telling them “*what great things the Lord has done for us.*”

How Goodness Is Measured

If good moral people do not have special revelation, their standard is inadequate or erroneous to some extent. In theory, all they can measure by is nature within and around them—general revelation, as we call it. They can misread even that. Their guide for goodness consists of natural law, perhaps Golden-Rule thinking, and social convention, and that is not always enough. Gandhi, for example, had some outstanding virtues but his Eastern religious background fostered non-Christian attitudes toward the existence of the individual in the physical realm.³ His behavioral ideals were affected accordingly. Vegetarianism, dietary austerity, and other forms of asceticism were part of what holiness naturally meant to him, being prompted by the Hindu disdain for the self and the material in contrast to non-physical, impersonal immortality. He renounced pleasure as such, which led, among other things, to celibacy the last forty-three years of his married life.⁴ His holiness was born of self-negation more than interpersonal expression. The impersonal character of Hindu ultimate reality is incompatible with the revealed interpersonal character of the Christian worldview, and it yielded predictable behaviors in the mahatma's life.

In the case of unevangelized people, we may theorize that, for the purposes of eternal judgment, God may restrict his evaluation to the overlap of conscience and special revelation.⁵ That is quite different from what is good as measured by his intentional will. Besides, no one lives up even to that, so no one is good even when evaluated by a lesser standard.

Goodness has a bigger scope of interest than the natural order. That context includes the eternal perspective. Paul pointed out the ethical implications of resurrection. Without it people tend to eat, drink, and be merry because tomorrow they die (1 Corinthians 15:1-34). That realm beyond the natural order also includes the transcendent perspective, God's will. Good people generally measure goodness in this-worldly terms in contrast to both supernatural and eternal considerations. Consequently, their goodness cannot be completely good.

When we say the world around us does not provide us with an adequate guide for goodness, we mean that not everything God wants can be figured out from what he has made. Goodness comes more ultimately from his eternal purposes. There is not a one-to-one correlation between his expectations and human nature. That is because of the kinds of purposes God has for us. He wanted to make what could choose to love him; so determinism was eliminated. Necessary love would be self-contradictory. Besides, the experience of being “loved” would not be very satisfying: *“Who would want to be married to a woman that could not other than love him?”* To adopt John Milton's terminology, what “delight” would we be to God if we could not do other than his will?⁶ Our potential for delighting him would be no greater than what the stars,

trees, and fish can do. The kind of purpose God had for moral creatures meant making their abilities broader than his standard.

Not only can morality not all be easily deduced from the created order; many moral issues are not just good or bad. Human versatility allows us to lead a fairly satisfying life even though a more satisfying one is available. While living a tolerable existence, we may not imagine a better one. “The good life” blinds us to abundant life. Even when some way of living hinders psychological and social well-being, it may take years or generations to verify its effects. By that time, it may be too late to undo the damage. Besides, the higher road is usually a harder one. Even when we know better, we tend to take the easier course. We may enjoy a pleasurable life enough to go a lifetime before seeing any need for something life changing. Another complication is that some things apparently do not hurt some people. Sugar seems harmless to most teenagers, but it can be devastating to the emotions and behavior of someone with hypoglycemia. Similarly, some activities may not be addictive to one person, but they are to others.

Moral behaviors can usually be corroborated by experience that is analyzed methodically. (Discovering them may not be as easy.) But goodness is not just perfection and maturity. As we observed before, there are service behaviors to consider as well. Service behaviors are even less obvious from nature than moral behaviors are. As a result, this second aspect of goodness is where good moral people are more deficient.

Even with the advantage of special revelation about divine service, it is not possible to apply it perfectly, given the ambiguities of life and ministry. Right attitudes, good motives, and careful thought still lead to wrong choices. Without the “other people” to overlook or forgive, the effects of the error remain. Being good moral people is hopeless anyway; being good moral people without special revelation is all the more hopeless.

In summary, there are two kinds of goodness—moral behavior and service behavior. There are two bases for measuring goodness—nature and revelation. There is one standard—perfection, or maturity. Clarifying these matters should raise our effectiveness in ministering to good people. Hopefully it will lower their confidence in their personal goodness.

Loss of Subjective Benefits

Good people’s motivation for goodness may be weaker than it should be. Many a man has been ennobled by marrying a woman that was better than he was. In a similar way, being consciously related to a loving, holy God makes good people into better ones. God’s love motivates them to remain noble under challenges to be otherwise, challenges by adversity, opposition, and rejection. His presence enables them to pursue decency in a world that frequently does not return it. When kids reject concerned parents, when spouses divorce faithful spouses,

when employers fire conscientious workers, when life gets ugly, and society proves unfair and even spiteful, good people can turn sour and lose their zest for being good. Without God society is all that is left. If society fails them, who will encourage them? Good people fall prey more easily to the temptations that are sure to come.

Good moral people also miss out on the sense of divine blessing. Salvation includes salvation from a reduced sense of worth. Doing good in and of itself is not nearly so fulfilling as when it builds a relationship with someone who loves us back. When we “*fall from [the] grace*” framework (cp. Galatians 5:4), we face more frustration at failure and more pride at success, both of which ruin goodness. We are hopelessly social. If God is not with us, society has to supply all our need for acceptance. Even if other people always appreciated proper behavior, we would still lack the feeling of being accepted by God.

Loss of Divine Glory

Although we need not imagine bad motives for their goodness, good people probably do not intend to be glorifying God. They do not do their goodness “as to the Lord.” Yet God is the one who defines good by his own nature and purposes, by his creation and revealed commissions. God is the one who enriches each person’s life with capacities and opportunities. Enjoying those endowments without acknowledging the personal element in them is like a child that opens a Christmas present and runs into the other room to play with it with his brother. Parents get a kick out of seeing the little guy enjoy his toy and share it with his brother, but they are also delighted when he says, “Oh boy! Thanks!”

Furthermore, since good people are not doing their goodness “*in the name of Christ*,” someone else or something else is getting credit for it. Other people connect their good deeds with democracy, credit their parents, idolize them, or say “*Allah be praised*.” Winsome ways may draw people to people, but they do not draw them to God. For that reason, Christians may want to say that good people’s good deeds are evil because those good deeds come from an evil context. They are directing attention to something that stands in the place of God, which is something like idolatry. While that is a conceivable effect, it is probably an exaggeration because that is not necessarily good people’s motive. They not likely trying to avoid crediting God or trying to credit someone besides God or even themselves. Nevertheless, the goodness is not as good as it could be because other people are not appreciating God for it.

As with people generally, good moral people do not give due attention to what they cannot see. In practical life, God above and eternity ahead fade out of the picture. Starting with tangible relationships and moving to the intangible ones can awaken a person’s consciousness to what we call “spiritual matters.” Like education generally, it moves from concrete to abstract,

following the developmental pattern of children into adults. The approach is especially appropriate in this educational endeavor because “spiritual matters” refers precisely to aspects of personal relationships. Living with other people is a spiritual matter.⁷ So are “goodness” and “salvation” in living with God.

The strategy does not use concrete analogies for abstract truths of another sort. It uses visible examples for invisible application of the same thing. It generalizes known experience to other like cases. It gives understanding to salvation and goodness, and shows the relevance and importance of what would otherwise be mystery and mere “religion.” Hopefully, when we approach them this way, good moral people will become better for it.

¹*Mere Christianity* (NY: Macmillan, 1952), 167.

²Note *What the Bible Says About Salvation* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1982), 46-49.

³Gandhi is not a good example of someone without access to revelation, studying as he did in England and being acquainted as he was with the teaching of Jesus. We refer to him because he is so well known as a “holy man.”

⁴On matters of this sort, see, for example, Louis Fischer, *Gandhi: His Life and Message for the World* (NY: The New American Library of World Literature, Inc., 1954), 28-34, 124-29.

⁵For one treatment of that sensitive issue, see *What the Bible Says About Salvation*, 20-21.

⁶Mankind is called “His New Delight” in *Paradise Lost* 4:106-7.

⁷Note the constant connection in scripture between the vertical and horizontal dimensions of personal relationship: Matthew 22:36-40; John 15:12-17; 1 John 3:14-23; 4:19-21; 5:1-3, etc. The God-to-man love spiral initiates the man-to-man love spiral. The “strategy” in this article traces the connection in the opposite direction.