

Why Be Good?

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Proverbs 2:1-10, 20-22

Luke 6:27-36

A few years back a group of atheists and humanists sponsored an ad campaign at Christmastime that ran on the sides of buses in London and Washington DC.

The London ad read. "There is no God, so relax and enjoy yourself." The DC ads were a little softer. They showed a picture of with the words "Why believe in a god? Be good for goodness' sake." Some Christians decided to run their own bus ad in response and pretty soon city buses all over the place were carrying the messages back and forth across the city.

The central issue raised by the debate was, why be good? It is a challenging question.

In fact in some ways it hinges on the emphasis we give the words "be good for goodness sake." Do we say, "Be good, for goodness sake!" i.e. the harried parent voice: for goodness sake, be good! Be good or else...

Or do we say, "be good, for goodness' sake" i.e. be good for the sake of goodness.

Why should we be good?

Theists or believers have argued that we as humans should be good because of God. Several reasons are offered.

The first is much like the Christmas song, Santa Claus is Coming to Town.

"You better watch out, you better not cry, better not pout, I'm telling you why, Santa Claus is coming to town. He sees you when you're sleeping, he knows when you're awake, he knows if you've be bad or good, so be good for goodness sake."

This is the "for goodness sake, be good," because God is watching, God notes everything. And if one is not good, one will be punished, suffer eternal torment, or go to hell.

A reason linked to that one is that there is an eternal life after this one, and it's going to be so great, so do what you need to now to get there.

That begs the question, if there was no God, would you still be good? If there was no afterlife, would you still be good?

A different argument is that we should be good because God asks it of us; it is our duty, our job on earth, our job as a human being, to be good.

And believers have argued that the only way people will be good is if there is an external transcendent God who makes them be good, and tells them what is good, versus what is evil.

One discussion on this that I followed online said "if the bank made a \$100,000 error in my favor and no one would ever find out, would I keep the money? Well, not if I was a Christian because God would know all about it. So I'd give it back. But if I did not believe in God, well, I would keep it. Because why give it back? No one would know?"

Which leads us to atheists or humanists, those folks who do not believe in God. Why would they be good? Is it possible to be a moral person without a belief in God?

Dan Barker of the Freedom From Religion Foundation writes:

“Why should I treat my neighbor nicely? Because we are all connected. We are part of the same species, genetically linked. Since I value myself and my species, and the other species to whom we are related, I recognize that when someone is hurting, my natural family is suffering.”

Atheists argue that one should be good for goodness' sake, be good for the sake of being good, or goodness is its own reward. Humanists argue that we live in a communal world and that our first responsibility is to do no harm and that is pretty easy to discern.

They also argue that they believe all there is is now, there is no eternal life, so one must make the most of this life rather than this life being a practice session for the next. Some also add that beyond being good and doing no harm, atheists are moved to repair the harm that has been done out of a sense of connectedness to other humans.

One example is when looking on the website Kiva which offers microlending to individuals in the developing world, the greatest contributors are those who identify as humanists or atheists.

Dan Barker continues “Of course, atheists and humanists often act in positive ways to stop the pain of others. This is compassion. Atheists can perhaps express compassion more easily than believers because we are not confused by:
fatalism ("Whatever happens is God's will"),
pessimism ("We deserve to suffer"),
salvation ("Death is not the end"),
retribution ("Justice will prevail in the afterlife"),
magic ("Pray for help"),
holy war ("Kill for God"),
forgiveness ("I won't be held responsible for my mistakes"), or
glory ("Suffering with Christ is an honor").

Since this is the only life we atheists have, each decision is crucial and we are accountable for our actions right now. And that's what makes life valuable: it didn't have to be. It is dear. It is fleeting. It is vibrant and vulnerable. It is heart-breaking. It can be lost. It will be lost.”

So yes, the atheists argue, it is fully possible to be good without divine help or even existence. “But how does one know what is good without God or the Bible to tell you,” the Christians argue. Atheists point to the fact that that the Bible approves of slavery, incest, polygamy, stoning people to death and more. Perhaps they have a point...

Why be good? And how do we know what is good?

Enter the scientists who have been studying altruism and acts of goodness. The benchmark of these studies is Trolleyology. Haven't heard of Trolleyology? Well, let me enlighten you. Researchers conducted a thought experiment with people from all walks of life, all religious persuasions, all over the world-200,000 of them. This was the test.

On your morning walk you see a trolley car hurtling down the track, the conductor slumped over the controls. In the path of the trolley are five men working on the track oblivious to the danger. You are standing at the fork in the track and can pull a level that will divert the trolley to the other track saving the five men. Unfortunately the trolley would then run over a single

worker who is working on that track. Is it permissible to throw the lever killing the one man to save the five? Is it moral?

What do you think?...

Almost everyone from all walks of life says yes.

But then consider part two of the test. You are on your morning walk on a bridge overlooking the trolley tracks. You spot the runaway trolley bearing down on the five workers. Now the only way to stop the trolley is to throw a heavy object in its path. The only heavy object within reach is a very large man standing next to you. Should you throw the man off the bridge and onto the track, killing one to save the five? Is it permissible? Is it moral?

What do you think?...

This time almost everyone says no, no matter what their social context. Why? What is the difference? What makes one good, or at least morally palatable, and the other not?

What scientists have discovered in looking at people's brains is that in the first dilemma with throwing the switch only the rational calculation part lit up. When faced with the bridge dilemma the parts that deal with emotions about other people as well as the computation parts light up which triggers a third part that registers the conflict. Ultimately it is the victory of an emotional impulse overrides a pure cost-benefit analysis.

So, are we good just because our brains are wired to be good? It is a human trait? But, the impulse to avoid harm which scientists have also studied is not just human. Rhesus monkeys in tests would rather go hungry than pull a chain that delivers food to them and a shock to another monkey. Is being good just a Darwinian development?

By natural selection an organism that trades favors with others, is seen as trustworthy and is generous, does better than one who is not. Being generous and fair, being good, does have evolutionary rewards. (The Moral Instinct, Steven Pinker, NY Times Magazine, Jan. 13 2008)

Given all that, where does that leave us, we who gather to worship God, to follow the teachings and ministry of Christ who believe in a transcendent being and find in our call to service the call to be good?

Well, for one thing, our faith does not make us superior. One can be good without faith.

Our faith does not make us infallible. Change over women's rights, racial justice, etc have shown us that our understanding of morality is expanding, growing, not set in stone (which does not make it totally relative either.)

Why be good?

Because God asks us to. Not because we will go to hell if we don't. But God, whom we choose to honor, asks us to be good. To love beyond the boundaries of love, to offer compassion in the atmosphere of hatred. To, as Jesus says, love our enemies, pray for those who persecute us, give and not expect repayment. God asks us to and so we work toward it. Because it is pleasing to God.

Why be good?

Because good is, in many ways, its own reward. Back to the example I used earlier of the Christian who said there was no reason beyond a faith one to give back the \$100,000 since no one knew. Well, another blogger responded, "yes, someone does know. You know." We know

when we do good or do not do good. And the cost for not doing good is regret, broken relationships, alienation, sorrow and grief. The reward for doing good may, in fact, be costly, as we talked about last week, but in our heart there is clearness and peace.

Why be good?

Because as Christians we have chosen this road. We have chosen to follow Jesus and to take part in his ministry. That means a choice to do good in all ways possible. To struggle and stretch to understand what good is, and to pray for wisdom when we are not certain. To gather together to discern what is good from our collective wisdom. To work toward a greater good that is possible because we are not alone. To return again and again to the radically inclusive love Jesus proclaimed, to love God and love neighbor as self. To love God and love enemy as self. To love God and offer one's life to the doing of good.

To walk in the steps of Jesus is perhaps to find a way out of the trolleyology paradigm. If a heavy object is needed to stop the trolley from killing five people, this trolley that you witness from your viewpoint on top of the bridge, it is not true that the only heavy object at hand is the large man standing next to you. It is also you. It is me. I can leap from the bridge to stop the trolley. I can be the one whose life is laid down for the others.

Being a Christian does not mean always leaping from the bridge but it does mean nurturing a passionate desire to do what is good, knowing that we may not always be entirely clear, but we can strive to be faithful, ever working toward the good, and breathing in the goodness of God.

In the words of the great Christian mystic, Thomas Merton, who prayed:

MY LORD GOD,
I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.
Nor do I really know myself,
And the fact that I think that I am following your will
Does not mean that I am actually doing so.

But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you.
And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.
I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.
And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road
Though I may know nothing about it.

Therefore will I trust you always
Though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.
I will not fear, for you are ever with me,
And you will never leave me to face my perils alone. (Thomas Merton, "Thoughts in Solitude").

Amen.