

Are you a good person? How would you answer that question? If so, what is it that makes you good? Is it the things that you don't do? You don't steal. You don't murder. You don't speed by more than 10 miles per hour over the limit, so you're a good person. Or, do you have to actively do good things to be a good person? You help old ladies across the street. You volunteer and do community service. You go to church. You give to charity, so you're a good person.

One website for high school and college students asked this question and the responses are interesting.

- I would consider myself as a neutral person, not a good person or a bad person. This is because I'm not selfish, greedy or disloyal but I'm not particularly merciful, I'm apathetic to some plights and I wouldn't be against killing people if I thought that they deserved death.
- I always thought I was a good person, but I'm obviously being punished for something.
- Heh, I don't think I've been punished enough.
- I know I'm a good person because I only try to hurt people when they've given me a reason. And I forgive people...when they've given me a reason.
- Knowing myself, I know I definitely have the potential to do bad things...but I have good intentions.
- I actively help people IRL and I give to a few charities each month. I'm hoping to get into heaven.
- I wish I were a good person and I try to be, but deep down I'm quite a bad person.
- I can't be the only one who genuinely knows I'm a bad person.

Are you a good person? How much bad does it take to make you a bad person? Maybe we're like the person who said, "I'm a good person who has done some bad things." Another survey asked people, "What are some things that scream, 'I'm not a good person.'"

- Cutting in line.
- Never accepting the blame for anything
- Not tipping.
- Putting down mutual friends when they're not around. If they do that with them, you know they do it with you.
- Treating those 'below' them badly- be it employees, service workers, or children.
- Throwing litter or cigarette butts out the car window.
- Playing music audibly in public when others can hear.
- Changing lanes without using your turn signal
- Not returning your shopping cart to the cart corral.
- Thinking about what they will say next instead of listening to you.
- One-upping people on anything and everything.
- Constantly telling people you are a good person.

In Matthew 5, 6, 7 Jesus talks about what it is that makes us a good person. He gives his understanding of morality and righteousness. These three chapters are known as the Sermon on the Mount because Jesus goes up a mountain to teach a crowd of people spread out below. This is Jesus' vision of what it means to follow him, and who we are to be as citizens of His kingdom.

One of the major themes of the Sermon on the Mount is what it really means to be a good person. The word Jesus uses is “righteousness.” Righteousness is doing what is morally right and legally just. It is to live in accordance with God’s laws. In the Sermon, Jesus promises blessing or happiness to those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. He warns us against practicing our righteousness just to be seen by other people. He calls us to seek the kingdom of God and his righteousness as our highest goal, and then all the joys of this world will be added as well.

Good Enough

If we were to ask Jesus, “How good is good enough?” What would He say? Early on in the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 5:20, Jesus gives us a seemingly impossible standard for righteousness. Our Core verse this week as we are in week 19 of Core 52 is Matthew 5:20:

For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Do you hear that? To even enter the kingdom, Jesus says, your righteousness, your moral goodness, has to exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees. That’s not what I want to hear. If these guys weren’t good enough, then there’s no way you and I could ever be good enough.

The scribes, historically, were people who made written copies of the Old Testament law for a living. There were no printers. There were no copy machines. It all had to be done by hand, and since the Jews understood the Old Testament to be the word of God, the scribes took this job very seriously. They didn’t just copy the Law. They studied it thoroughly. They knew forwards and backwards, inside and out. They could tell you how many words were in each book and what the middle word in each book should be. This is how they would check the accuracy of their copies. By Jesus’ day, the Scribes had become respected community leaders.

Then there were the Pharisees. No, for those of us who grew up in church, the Pharisees are sort of the perennial bad guys. They were Jesus’ arch enemies. What we need to remember though is the Pharisees had devoted their entire lives to not just being good, but being perfect. If you did a man on the street survey in ancient Jerusalem, everyone would agree, they were the definition of righteousness. Being good was their full-time hobby. In addition to knowing the Law, they had dozens and dozens books to help them apply the law to every circumstance in life.

Nobody was more righteous than these guys. Even the name Pharisee means “separated ones.” They lived separate lives to not be polluted by the unclean masses. They were devoted to doing the right thing. They prayed three times a day, and I don’t mean just giving thanks for their meals. They fasted twice a week. They tithed...everything, even the herbs from their garden. They would measure out a 10th of the mint, a 10th of their dill, a 10th of their cumin, and bring those tithes to the temple. They even had rules to keep them from accidentally breaking a rule.

They had rules for everything. You couldn’t take a bath on the Sabbath, because you might accidentally splash some on the floor and thereby be guilty of washing it. Chairs could not be moved because dragging them might make a furrow in the ground and you would be guilty of tilling the soil. Women

weren't allowed to look in mirrors, because they might see a gray hair and pull it out. You could not wear false teeth because they exceeded the allowed weight limit. They had 24 chapters in their books devoted just to rules for keeping the Sabbath.

And Jesus says that to even enter the kingdom our righteousness must exceed their righteousness. How does Jesus expect us to do better than these guys? How could we ever do more?

A Deeper Righteousness

Jesus isn't calling for a broader righteousness. He's calling for a deeper righteousness. Jesus isn't asking for more rules, more laws, more dos and don'ts, but he is calling for a change of heart. Jesus doesn't want us to do more, He wants us to be more.

The problem with the scribes and the Pharisees was that they had all of these rules, but they were never used to build a closer relationship with God, but to build a bigger public image. They followed the rules on the outside, but inside they were far from God and far from others. For them, the righteousness of their rule following was a matter of showmanship. It was performance art all done for public acclaim and bragging rights. Look how good we are.

Their rules focused only on external compliance, but they never addressed the attitude of the heart. They used the rules to make themselves look good while at the same time manipulating the rules to get what they wanted. They were masters of malicious compliance— following the letter of the law but never fulfilling its intent.

One of my favorite examples is this one. They had one rule that on the Sabbath you couldn't travel more than 3,000 feet from your house. You weren't supposed to work on the Sabbath. It was to be devoted to worship and rest. More than 3,000 feet was a journey and that was work according to the Pharisees.

But, if the day before the Sabbath, you had stashed some food 3,000 feet from your house, you could go there on the Sabbath and eat the stash of food, and because their rules said that food stash was an extension of their house, they could travel another 3,000 feet. In this manner, the Pharisees would travel as far as far as they wanted. They had perfected a way of using rules to get around the very intent of what God wanted.

So, when Jesus looked at their hearts, what he saw there wasn't a deep love of God, a devotion to His word, and love for their fellow man. He saw pride, arrogance, and selfishness. They wanted everyone to think they were God's BFFs, but in their hearts they weren't interested in what God wanted, only in what others thought.

Jesus isn't asking for us to do more. He is asking for us to be different. Jesus doesn't want a greater degree of rule keeping; He wants a greater motivation. We need a goodness that changes our hearts, that changes us from the inside out. The heart of the issue is the heart. Good enough isn't about what we do, it's about who we are.

And therein lies the problem— We Can't truly be good because something is wrong with our heart. Have you ever had something that was being eaten away by rust, or wood that was rotting from the inside out? You can slap a fresh coat of paint over the rust or rottenness. It can hide it, disguise it for a while, but the nature of the problem always shows itself. It breaks. It crumbles. It falls apart. We had some deck boards that were rotting out. We power cleaned the deck. We sealed the deck, but guess what. One day I stepped on one of those boards and my foot fell right through.

That's our problem. There is something wrong with our heart. You can add all the rules you want. You can try and force compliance on the outside, but there is still something rotten on the inside. Later on, in Matthew 12:33-35 Jesus tells the Pharisees this:

33 "Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad, for the tree is known by its fruit. 34 You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. 35 A good person produces good things from the treasury of a good heart, and an evil person produces evil things from the treasury of an evil heart

It's not just the Pharisees who have this problem. It's me. It's you. Sin infects the very core of our being. Paul writes in the book of Romans, and he is quoting, in part, from the Psalms. Romans 3:10-12, "*None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.*" It's a universal problem.

Our morality problem is not a behavior problem. It is a heart problem. Jesus says in Mark 7:21-23a,

"For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within."

Posting a few rules on a sign can't change that. Something has to be done at the very core of our desires. This is where Jesus is looking when He says our righteousness has to exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees. This brings us to the next important truth when it comes to morality.

Here's another important truth— A Good Life Comes from A Changed Heart. True goodness requires something to happen to your heart to make it good. You can't change a person from the outside in. You have to change them from the inside out. And it is this heart change that Jesus is looking for.

Our morality can't change, unless there is an inner change in our heart. Just because you follow a list of rules, doesn't mean that your heart is in the right place.

In the second half of Matthew 5, Jesus gives 6 examples of this deeper righteousness that comes from the heart. Jesus says, "You have heard it said," and he quotes the Law or, more specifically, the Pharisees interpretation of the Law, and he shows how it doesn't go deep enough, and then he says, "but I say to you," and He shows us the heart issue at the heart of the issue.

Jesus begins with murder. This isn't just against God's law, but this rule exists in nearly every code of laws throughout human history. But Jesus tells us the heart issue is anger.

“21 You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ 22 But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment.”

Anger is the driving force behind murder. Murder is nothing more than anger in full flower. And even if you never take someone’s life, that doesn’t mean you are good, if your heart is still filled with resentment and rage. Anger doesn’t kill with one pull of the trigger or a single stab of a knife, but still it kills, little by little with hurtful word upon hurtful word, with one bitter act followed by another. We gash with gossip, we injure with innuendo. We stab with slander. We assault with accusations. With our anger we murder hope, kill relationships, and slaughter dreams.

Jesus then turns his attention to adultery. Though most regard adultery as wrong, especially if they are the victim, it is still widespread. But Jesus points out that affairs begin long before the actual act takes place. Adultery begins with lust in the heart. Jesus says in verse 27, *“everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”*

In our hypersexualized culture where we carry porn in our pocket, and sex sells potato chips, lust seems so pervasive that most people regard it as normal. Is it any wonder we deal with so much sexual dysfunction? Lust does more than unravel homes and relationships, it unravels our mental, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing.

Jesus then tackles divorce. The Pharisees while strictly prohibiting adultery permitted a man to divorce his wife for almost any reason, so in essence a Pharisee could leave his wife for another woman over and over again, and still consider themselves good and righteous. But Jesus identifies the ugly truth of a society that treats both women and marriage as disposable. In essence it was no different than cheating on them. For her the pain and consequences were as if she had committed adultery.

Or how about telling the truth. The Pharisees had a whole hierarchy of things that they swore oaths by, and depending on what it was, it determined how truthful you had to be, or if you had to keep a promise. The whole system was designed to convince others you could be trusted, but still give you wiggle room to get out of it. Instead, Jesus says, *“Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No.’”* Say what you mean and mean what you say.

Jesus, similarly deals with revenge. Instead of aggressive resistance that always tries to get even, Jesus calls for non-violent resistance that turns the cheek, gives more than demanded and goes further than required. Such a peacemaking response exposes the true motives of the oppressor, undermining their power.

Finally, Jesus takes it even further, by calling us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute you. It is one thing to love your friends and neighbors. It’s easy to love those who love you, but only a transformed heart could do this. Not only does this seem counter-intuitive, it seems absolutely ridiculous.

Why would Jesus tell us to love our enemies? Because that’s how He loved us. Romans 5:8 says, *“God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”* Our own hearts are changed

because God loved us while we were still his enemies, and when we love our enemies, it injects the life-giving, heart changing power of the love of Jesus into the most hardened hearts.

It is the only way to break the cycle of sin and selfishness. It is the only way to stop the dysfunctional spiral of revenge, resentment, bitterness and one-upmanship that otherwise consumes us and destroys our relationships. It opens the door for a new reality to take root and grow.

This kind of life change requires heart change. Your behavior, your words and your actions, your morality, all flow from the heart. Proverbs 4:23 says, "*Guard your heart above all else, for it determines the course of your life.*"

What does the Bible mean when it talks about the heart? When we talk about the heart and the mind, we are talking about our emotions and our intellect. Our heart is what we feel. Our mind is what we think. These two forces battle within us pulling us in different directions. Some people are more led by the heart and others lead more with their minds.

We have to be careful though in carrying this thinking over when we read these same words in the Bible as though Matthew or Jesus meant the same thing by heart as we do.

We would certainly recognize the Greek word for heart— *Kardia*, from which we get *cardiac*, as in cardiac arrest, cardiogram, and cardiologist. Just like our word *heart*, *Kardia* can refer to the literal organ beating within your chest. Also, just like our word *heart*, the Greco-Roman world used *kardia* in a metaphorical sense.

However, they talked about the heart representing all of the inner self. The heart represented mind, will, and emotions. My Greek Lexicon says that *heart* or *kardia* represents the "essence of life in terms of thinking, willing, and feeling— the inner self, mind, thoughts, feelings, and being."

In Luke 10:27, where Jesus calls us to "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind,*" Jesus isn't carving up human nature into separate categories of emotions, spirit, body, and intellect. Rather, Jesus is using interchangeable terms, that overlap in meaning. This is a very Jewish way of communicating— emphasizing by repeating the same idea in different words. This is Jesus' way of saying, "Love God with everything you've got."

Now, in the interest of keeping you fully informed, when Jews in the 1st Century wanted to talk about their emotions, they wouldn't talk about their heart. Do you know what organ they used? Do you know where they saw the seat of emotions? It was the bowels.

In 1 John 3:17, John talks about seeing a brother or sister in need, but having no pity or compassion for them. The ESV says "*closes his heart against him.*" The Greek doesn't actually say *heart*. It literally says, "*and shuts up his bowels from him.*" How dare you shut you bowels to your brother or sister. The meaning simply doesn't carry over across the cultures. Go home guys and look longingly and lovingly into your wife's eyes and tell her "I love you with all my bowels, all 25 feet of them," and see how that works for you.

So, when the Bible talks about your heart, it's talking about something more than what you feel. When we say that true goodness, or true morality requires a change of heart, it means a change of thinking, a change of feeling, and a change of desire.

Only God Can Change Our Hearts.

Here is the heart of the issue, pun intended. If our morality flows from our hearts, but something has gone terribly wrong with our hearts, then how can we be good? We can't change our own heart. A bad heart can't make a bad heart good. Did you get that? A bad heart can't make a bad heart good. You can't think it different, feel it different, or will it different. It's not about trying hard enough, working long enough or wanting it bad enough. We need heart surgery and you can't change your own heart.

Only God can change our hearts. Simply put, we need Jesus to change our "want to." Too often we think of morality only in terms of "ought to", but Jesus wants to deal with you on the level of "want to."

God doesn't just want you to do the right thing. He wants you to do the right thing because you love Him and want to do what pleases Him.

The one thing that can suddenly and totally transform the way someone behaves is love. You will do things for someone you love that you would never do for anyone else. Love can transform menial tasks into joy. Love can make you do things that you have never done before. That is the power of a changed heart, and that is the source of true righteousness. It's not that what you do doesn't matter, but what's changed is why you're doing it.

God's expectations for our lives haven't changed. What's changed is how we're expected to meet those expectations. When we place our faith in Jesus, and we surrender our lives to Him, and His Spirit inhabits our lives and changes our hearts, it transforms all those "Got to dos" into "get to dos" It's no longer a list of all the things I have to do or things I can't do. It simply becomes what we desire, because we desire Him.

So, what is our response? How do we seek to be good? We need to focus on who more than the what. As long as we focus on the what, we will find our strength coming up short. Have you ever sworn off a bad habit. I am never biting my nails again. I will never again eat a whole box of Twinkies at once. I will never watch that. I will never do that. I will never go there. I will never say that. I will never take that, use that or drink that again. How many of us sworn never again, only to do it again?

How many of us have promised to always do something. I will always run 3 miles a day. I will always get my steps in. I will always respond with kind words. I will drink Kale smoothies for lunch 5 days a week. I will pray every day. I will read my Bible every day. How long did it last?

If we're counting on the what to make us good, we will fall short. We need to focus on the Who, and that Who is Jesus, and He is the one that who will change your heart and make you right.