

Proverbs 16:2-9, 16-20, 32-33
Luke 6:43-49

PLENTY OF GOODNESS

Have you ever known anybody who was a villain in his or her own eyes? I was reading about Eva Braun not long ago. Why would she want to consort with one of history's worst villains? But she didn't know, did she? She did not think of Hitler in that light. His needs and her needs were all mixed up so close together that she truly could not have had a very balanced perspective. But what about Hitler himself? I believe it is quite clear that he did not see himself as a villain. Often, perhaps, as a misunderstood savior, even a persecuted savior, but never as a villain. Have you ever known any person who thought of themselves or saw themselves as a villain? Hold that question (and your answer) aside for the moment, but don't lose it.

We grow up thinking that life is a contest between good and evil. We are trained from childhood to "see" life in terms of good guys (essentially) versus bad guys (essentially). Once established, this pattern is superimposed on everything. The good guys make life good for us. The bad guys make it bad for us. Ipso facto, anybody who makes it hard is a bad guy. In some strange, uncanny way, we all choose the good guys for our friends. Occasionally there is a traitor or a turncoat among them. At least that helps to explain some unforeseen problems. But we are good guys, and so are most of our friends. And that's wonderful. But do we actually realize that it seems this way to everybody? Even the opposition? Even our enemies?

It follows, naturally, that we want good homes, good cars, good jobs, good stores, good food, good weather, good grades. And we do not want bad homes, bad cars, bad jobs, etc. We also want to do good, have a good record, make a good performance, have a good life. Anything that threatens any of this is bad. But we are not bad – and that's right! But do we also realize that it feels this same way to *everybody*?

Can you feel how this mind-set shapes and defines everything? We grow up thinking of ourselves as neutral, or perhaps inclined toward evil (by a misunderstood "doctrine of original sin"). Either way, we are convinced that the choice between good and evil is ever before us. The drama of life is us learning to choose good and finally learning to be good. But despite some early mistakes and lingering errors, we are all conscious of having wanted to be good – of having wanted

to choose the good instead of the evil, for the most part – for as far back as we can remember. It is the drama of life to want to be good and to learn to choose it. That also is the same for everybody, everywhere.

The second phase of this thinking may not be quite so universally true, but it certainly is pervasive in our culture. Clearly the solution to life – whatever problems we encounter – is to “get” (convince) more people to want to be good and to choose the good. Naturally, if things are bad, it must be because some people are bad and choosing the bad *on purpose*. “He sold me a bad car.” “He hired me for this job, which I thought was supposed to be good. But it isn’t working out, so he must be a bad person. He did this to me on purpose.”

If anything is going wrong, it must be because bad people are behind it, making bad choices *on purpose*. Therefore the most important solution to life is to convince more and more people to choose the good and to want to be good. We conceive of this as very hard work indeed, convincing all the people who want to be bad – who wallow and glory in badness – to change their minds and hearts and decide to be good, so we can overcome our problems and have a decent world to live in.

This thinking pervades everything. We could solve all the problems at school if we could just convince the bad students to be good students. Much effort is put into this attempt because this is the “model” of life that we have. Along the way, of course, we also have to “get” some of the bad teachers (those who choose to teach badly) to change sides and come over to the good side and start teaching really well. They could be good if they wanted to be. That’s almost an automatic assumption, according to the “model” of what we think life is like.

And all the people in prison and jail, etc. The solution is to get all the bad guys to want to be good. One way – one of the most cherished beliefs of our culture, at least – is to make it hard enough on bad people that they will *want* to change and be good. This thinking, subtly or directly, affects everything: raising children; business; politics; church – everything. For example, who are the good guys at the Olympics if somebody breaks the rules? Why is it necessary to add in such a heavy dose of that perspective? It just happens, because that is the way we think about everything. In the case of cheating at the

Olympics, it is sometimes almost too obvious and we get occasionally embarrassed. Few of us really suspect that any athlete turns up at the Olympics just to be bad. Humans do not turn up anyplace just to be bad, at least not from their own perspective.

But notice, whenever there is an issue, like a peace movement or an upcoming election. Most of the time it will simply be assumed that there are good guys and bad guys. And the task of the good guys is to convince all the bad guys to change sides – to want to be good. We use fancier words, sometimes: consciousness-raising; education; awareness; raising the issues. It comes to the same thing. People advocating a peace movement assume that the rest of us have not noticed the threat of atomic extinction. People advocating an ecological program assume that the rest of us are too greedy or unconcerned to want to save the environment. People advocating any movement or program to help anything or anyone assume the stance of good guys, and assume that the rest of us are bad guys unless we drop whatever we are doing to come help them in their cause.

The solution to life, then, is to get more people to want to be good and to choose it! At least that is the common assumption. Even though we may not agree with it in our conscious minds, still this old framework is deeply ingrained, and it keeps sneaking up on us.

This whole perspective is wrong, of course. Jesus brought us some entirely new premises. The church, supposedly, is a fellowship of men and women who see the new perspective and help each other to live by it, and who hope that in time the whole world will see the drama of life in a different way. It is often referred to as the difference between Law and Gospel, or between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant or the Old Testament and the New Testament. Nevertheless, the real issues of life are not illumined but are obscured by this superficial view of good guys versus bad guys. Life is not a matter of good versus evil. In part, it may have a lot to do with love versus indifference. It surely has a lot to do with hope and joy and appreciation versus greed and complaint and fear. But even these things we tend to drag back down into a contest between good and evil.

The truth is that there is plenty of goodness in the world. There is plenty of goodness in people too – in all of us. We seem to be born with an instinct to goodness and a longing for more. Often it is our very problem that we want to be too good, too fast, and for too many

people. The standard and the expectation we set for ourselves in our inward mind are beyond reason. We already want to be good and try to be good, and we always have. Sometimes we pretend to more than we have attained, no doubt, because the desire is so great. But mostly we really do believe that we have chosen goodness insofar as time and life have granted us opportunity, and considering the circumstances we are faced with. There are simply three great “realities” behind our struggle to be good that keep undoing us:

1.) It is good that fights with good. It is the good I see against the good my antagonist sees – not my good against his evil. The big battles and the important mayhem in life are always between two “goods”: two plans for good; two concepts of how to attain the goal; two people or two groups dedicated to achieving the good. It is not good against evil but *good against good* that tears life up and destroys our peace.

2.) Secondly, there is endless good to be done. There is literally no end to it. If you feed a hungry person, there are ninety-nine more. If you feed ninety-nine, there are a thousand more. That is not to suggest that you should not feed the one. But you must know that the ninety-nine will then haunt your conscience and make you feel less good than before. And if the ninety-nine learn that you have fed the one, they will be angrier with you for not feeding them than they will be with someone who has fed no one.

And while you were feeding some, there were others who needed clothes, others who needed education, others who needed medicine, others who needed freedom from oppression, and on and on. There is endless good to be done. To begin with goodness is to become more and more aware of inadequacy and shortcomings – and of badness and guilt. The more people we help, the greater the temptation to stop caring personally. There is endless good to be done, and that is a reality more terrible than the evil we usually think of as our enemy. We live in the midst of countless possibilities for doing good. Most of them we cannot touch; we have to choose. Good competes with good, not with evil.

3.) Goodness causes jealousy. If someone preaches a bad sermon, am I jealous? If you say to me, “So-and-so is a marvelous person, so wonderfully understanding and insightful, and truly the most faithful and dedicated Christian I have ever met,” *then* am I jealous? Unless it is a very fine day, my prayers are still fresh within

me, and I am feeling rested, relaxed, and confident of my friends and my own worth, you better believe I am!

The greatest problem in “community” comes from the jealousy people experience over each other’s goodness. It is never admitted – never spoken of directly or openly. But the conflicts and tensions trace back to this jealousy. It is always a contributing factor. When it is so very important that we be good and accomplish goodness, it is certainly threatening to find others who may be surpassing us in goodness. Most of us know people who are faster, bigger, smarter, prettier, richer, or more knowledgeable in this or that than we are. Such awareness is familiar and commonplace. Who do you know who is more loving than you are? Who do you know who cares more? Who do you know who is really better – superior – in goodness? (I don’t mean some famous saint you can admire safely from a distance; I mean somebody close – somebody you know and live around.) The mind does not even keep or consider that information, does it?

Good fights with good. There is endless good to be done. Goodness causes jealousy. From these three realities come the principle you can trust: “No good deed, no matter how small, will ever go unpunished.” These things are revealed by the prophets, by our Lord, by all of God’s true servants through the ages. Know them and warn your friends and children. And do what good you can anyway! But know what you are doing and what to expect in return. I do not mean to imply that no one will ever appreciate any of your efforts; there are always some saints in the vicinity. However, they are not always in the majority.

So the problem is not goodness. There is plenty of goodness. The urge to do good and to be good is huge within all of us. I suspect that despite our flaws, we all do far more good than we know – and that God appreciates it a lot more than we realize or allow ourselves to be comforted by.

What then is lacking, if not goodness? It is *our obedience* that is missing. There is plenty of goodness but not very much obedience – meaning, obedience under God. Goodness is just another temptation to pride. I still want to be in control, still want to save the world “my way,” still want the notoriety – at least eventually. In fact, the more I think myself capable of doing good to others and being good, the more I am likely to consider myself a superior person, worthy of special

privilege and consideration. If I am really good or good at something, I can write my own ticket (at least part of it) and have my own way.

Goodness is pride and the enemy of humility. The good guys never surrender, not even to God. They think they can win on their own – that they have deserved to win. Good people do not need a Savior; they do not need salvation. They just want more power to accomplish their good deeds in their own way. In the end, of course, God will be proud of them and welcome them with open arms. That is the unwritten end of the story behind the myth of goodness. But the truth is that there is plenty of goodness – and all the pride that goes with it. That is what keeps us from turning to God.

So good people run around doing good, but not the good that God asks of them. It is ever out of time, out of place, or for the wrong people in the situation. Or it is the wrong good among the many goods competing for our allegiance. You can do good forever, but it will not do any good unless God directs it – unless the Lord has sent you for this very purpose.

We hunger to be good and to do good, but humility is the door. *“I am the vine, you are the branches. Apart from me you can do nothing.”* So says the Christ. There is plenty of goodness. It is obedience that we lack: the desire to obey God; the desire to do nothing apart from God – nothing God does not ask of us. The issue is not whether we desire to do good or evil. The issue is whether we see ourselves as masters or as servants. Do we run things ourselves, or do we worship Another?