

SLD10.25.09 Tough Questions Sermon Series
Emory Presbyterian Church
Ephesians 2: 8-9
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“How Good Do I Have To Be?”

Today’s question is “How Good Do I Have To Be?,” number three in this sermon series about tough questions we’re wrestling with together. Not necessarily answering, but examining together. And, since I’m up here and you’re down there, I get to wax theological on this Reformation Sunday about my views and the views of our foremothers and fathers. But that’s all any of us can offer – views, colored by our particularity, our own history and context and hopes. So I invite you to listen for anything you recognize as true, and let the rest fall away.

So far we’ve addressed together the question of where God is when things go wrong, and why we bother praying even when we don’t get what we want. Today we’ll look together at the question of just how good God calls us to be. What, really, is required of us seekers and disciples of Jesus Christ? Just what, if anything, do we have to do to merit God’s love, earn God’s forgiveness, achieve eternal salvation?

It’s a tough question. I mean, if we were asking how good we have to be to, say, finagle a special privilege from our parents, or make a sports team, or get into college, or beat the odds in Las Vegas, or even save a marriage, there’d likely be some specific terms laid out for us, some named behaviors, or special requirements, or statistics to be achieved. If you were trying to figure out what you’d have to do to get a raise, or an award, or parole after a prison sentence, *somebody* would probably be able to spell it out for you.

But when we ask in *church*, in *worship*, before *God and 'em*, how good we have to be, it's bound to be a little trickier.

Not that we don't have guidelines, mind you. Scripture gives us plenty of guidelines. "What does Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God?" asks the prophet Micah. Want to know how to be? "Follow these ten commandments," insists Moses. "Do unto others as you would have them do to you," advises Jesus. (Mt. 7:12) "Love God with all your heart, soul and mind, and your neighbor as yourself." (Mt.22:34) "Don't judge others." (Mt. 7:1) "Love your enemies." (Mt. 5:44) And so forth.

We've got no shortage of guidelines.

But the question before us today is not so much *what* we're supposed to do...as how *well* we have to do it...you know...in order to get divine points, favors, gifts, cooperation, and of course, that ultimate goal of every faithful Christian, life eternal in the company of Jesus. (Or, at the very least, avoidance of eternal damnation.)

You and I and James all know that faith without works is dead, but just how much work is required? Everybody I know is already busy, stressed and stretched; to measure up, what else exactly do we have to take on? In other words, how good is "good enough?" And can we anxious yet determined North American Christians ever get there?

The short answer, at least if you hail from the Reformed tradition, is..."no." "No." No matter how much you do, how much you give, or how hard you try, if you're Presbyterian, before God you're never going to measure up.

Bummer, huh. Sort of a “doomed before you’ve even get started” scenario.

Makes a body wanna quit trying, doesn’t it? Or could it be a relief?

Anyway, what about being created in the “*imago dei*,” the image of God? What about God calling creation “good?” *We’re* creation; aren’t *we* good? What about “that of God in every one of us,” as the Quakers say. Surely if we cultivate *that* part, the “that of God in us” part, we’re bound to improve, become more God-like. Not that we’re ever going to achieve perfection, what if we face all our demons and confess all our sins and take responsibility for all our shortcomings and apologize for messing up and promise to change and take action to make the situation right? *Then* will we measure up? No? What if we make reparations and do penance and even pay money to sort of balance out our debt before God and humanity, would we be “good enough” *then* to be “saved?”

Well, if you asked Calvin that question, the answer would still be “no.”

But if you asked the Catholic Church in 16th century Europe, you’d *finally* get a “yes.” If, after you confess and do penance, you pay enough money to the church to set things straight on your behalf, why, then, yes, you can be saved.

This was called the sale of indulgences and it drove the reformers, who were also Catholic, a little crazy. An indulgence, according to Catholic canon law, is the full or partial remission of temporal punishment for sins which have already been forgiven. The indulgence is granted by the church after the sinner has confessed and received absolution.¹ The belief is that indulgences draw on the storehouse of merit acquired by Jesus’ sacrifice and the virtues and of the saints.²

¹ [^ Code of Canon Law, \(Cann. 992-997\) Indulgences; Enchiridion Indulgentiarum, 4th ed., 1999.](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG1104/___P3I.HTM)
http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG1104/___P3I.HTM

² [a b c d](#) Wetterau, Bruce. World history. New York: Henry Holt and company. 1994.

You see, from the standpoint of the 16th century Mother Church, the answer to how good you had to be to earn God's love, merit God's forgiveness and achieve salvation for your soul was, pretty darn good. And if you *weren't*, that is, if you messed up or misbehaved or otherwise broke the rules of the church, then the church – on behalf of God, don't you know – would let you know right quick what you had to do to make it right – say so many “Hail Marys” and “Our Fathers” and perform so many acts of penance.

Now at its best, this system of confession and redemptive acts was quite helpful in balancing connection with, and accountability to, the divine will. I mean, we're all bound to mess up, right? At least there existed a church-sponsored arrangement by which the church, as intermediary, could help you set things straight with God. This often could, and can, be a relief, of conscience and of faith.

But you know how we humans are: we get a little power over each other and we go a little nuts.

And back in the 16th century, the Catholic Church had a *lot* of power over its adherents. Not that it doesn't now, but back then when most people were illiterate and superstitious and dropping like flies from the Bubonic Plague, and wars were forever breaking out and political alliances shifting and everything in chaos...the Catholic Church *really* was the only relatively stable and anchoring institution. Still, hanging over everybody was this scary medieval cosmology, or way the universe was put together, that consisted of this ascending ladder to heaven and this descending ladder to hell, and the Church was the keeper of the keys to both directions. So you can imagine who

was in charge. Imagine, too, given how miserable life on earth was back then, the general terror associated with eternal damnation to a hell that was even worse!

Well, as often happens when ignorance, fear, power and money form a square and do a dance, things got a little out of hand.

“The later Middle Ages saw the growth of considerable abuses (of this practice of selling indulgences, abuses never, of course, originally intended by the Catholic Church) such as the unrestricted sale of indulgences by professional "pardoners," who collected contributions (from those who had sinned) to support special projects of the church. To raise the payback, these pardoners even preached, out of ignorance or shrewdness, that these indulgences would release the damned from hell.

On the occasion of the Crusades, things went from bad to worse: permission was granted to Catholic kings and princes to retain for themselves a big chunk of the draw on the sale of indulgences. Mind you, back in 1392, more than a century before the Protestants rebelled, Pope Boniface IX ...”condemned the practice of those who falsely claimed that they were authorized by the pope to forgive all sorts of sins, and exact money from the simple-minded by promising them perpetual happiness in this world and eternal glory in the next.”³

Unfortunately, though, two centuries later, Pope Leo X initiated again the sale of indulgences especially for those who gave alms to rebuild St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. This was the action that provoked Martin Luther to nail his 95 Theses on the doors of the Castle Church at Wittenburg in protest of what he saw as the purchase and sale of

³ W.H. Kent (1913). "Indulgences". *Catholic Encyclopedia*. New York: Robert Appleton Company. [http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Catholic_Encyclopedia_\(1913\)/Indulgences](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Catholic_Encyclopedia_(1913)/Indulgences).

salvation. Listen to Thesis Number 28 of the 95 that reads Luther's primary objection: "As soon as a coin in the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory springs".⁴

Luther's Ninety-Five Theses not only denounced such transactions as worldly but denied the Pope's right to grant pardons on God's behalf in the first place. The only thing indulgences guaranteed, Luther said, was an increase in profit and greed, because the pardon of the Church was in God's power alone. Anyway, "Christians should be exhorted ...to follow Christ...through penalties, deaths and hells, Luther felt, ...rather than through a false assurance of peace." (94 and 95th Theses⁵)

Like Luther, "Calvin criticized indulgences not merely for overcharging for salvation, but because of the grotesque distortion of the gospel that could make such a travesty possible." He writes, "It is in Christ, not in the church, that the treasury of merit is to be found, and he dispenses it freely to all who throw themselves upon him in faith. Although there is no salvation outside of the church, there is no salvation from the church. Although the church is 'the mother of the faithful,' she is not the source or object of faith."⁶

And who or what *is* the source and object of faith? Why, God, of course. The God who created us, redeemed us through Christ Jesus, and who, through the Holy Spirit, sustains us even now. To Calvin, the fact of the matter is that, however you want to look at it, humanity messes up. Even when we don't mean to. "Total Depravity" may be a little rough for some of us to swallow but if anything short of perfection is sin (and the challenge of being human is so complex that God knows better than to expect

⁴ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indulgence>

⁵ <http://www.spurgeon.org/~phil/history/95theses.htm>.

⁶ "Is Calvin Still Relevant After 500 Years? It all Depends" by Michael Horton <http://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/articles/onsite/calvinrelevant.html>

perfection⁷, then who of us is without sin? As far as Calvin was concerned, no matter how hard we try, before God, none of us is “good,” and not even the intervention of the church can make us so.

But here’s the thing: *what if we didn’t have to be?*

What if we didn’t *have* to be good for God to love us? What if we didn’t *have* to meet and exceed all the gospel imperatives to earn God’s affection and care? What if we didn’t *have* to love our neighbor, or serve on the Session, or forgive our enemies in order for God to accept and forgive us? In fact, what if all the standards you or I or our parents or our friends or our teachers or our spouses or our bosses set out there to measure “good enough,” didn’t apply to God at all?

What if God’s love for us doesn’t have the first thing to do with our goodness or badness? What if God’s forgiveness is offered to us even before we confess? What if our “salvation” has already been taken care of, and isn’t contingent upon how we live our lives? What if it’s okay that we’re not okay? In fact, what if...God so loved the world’s “unokayness” that God gave the only begotten Son so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but have eternal life? (Jn 3:16)

Because that, friends, is what our faith tells us happened some 2,000 years ago. Through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God already worked out creation’s salvation, well before you and I even had a *chance* to be good or bad. Do we still imagine salvation is in our hands? Through our works? Contingent on our behavior?!

⁷ How Good Do We Have To Be?, Harold Kushner, Little, Brown and Co, Canada, 1996. P.10.

Don't do it, says the Apostle Paul. "It's by *grace* that you've been saved through faith, he writes, and this is *not your own doing*. It is the gift of God – not the result of works - so that no one may boast."

Scripture abounds with examples: How good, after all, does the prodigal son have to be for his father to welcome him home? How good does the prostitute Rahab have to be for God to commission her to help the Hebrews? How good does Judith have to be to decapitate Holofernes? How good did the murderer Moses have to be for God to insist he lead God's people? How good did that conniving adulterer David have to be to wear the mantle of king? For that matter, how good did Peter have to be called the rock on which the church was founded?

It's not that one's behavior is irrelevant, or that anything goes (you *know* that doesn't ring true for Calvin), but that God's grace does not *depend* upon us or our behavior. God's grace and love and forgiveness are not a function of what we do or don't do; it's a windfall, a gift, a bolt, quite literally, from the blue. A generous, unmerited, even absurd gift to be enjoyed, celebrated, appreciated, praised.

Regardless of how we are, how we were, or how we will be, God loves us, anyway. God forgives us, anyway. God uses us, anyway. God grows us, anyway. God calls us, anyway.

The radical nature of God's gracious love can be difficult to remember when we've messed up yet again; failed to follow God's laws, yet again; hurt someone we love, yet again; succumbed to our addictions, yet again. It's also easy to forget when things are going well - when we feel proud of ourselves, when our friends value us, our workplace rewards us, our community lauds us, our territory expands. But, Paul insists,

and Calvin after him, neither what we do, nor what we don't do, renders us whole before the Almighty. It is by grace alone that we are saved through faith. And this is not our own doing; it is the gift of God.

And listen, as a first class Pharisee, nobody loved the law more than Paul did, nor worked so hard to follow it. But when Paul's eyes were blinded to the world and opened to Jesus Christ, he learned that his fastidious following of the law wasn't the path to righteousness he thought it was. If the law were a path to anything, it was to humility. For who of us is able to love God with all our heart, soul, and might (Dt.6:5), and "our neighbor as ourselves?" (Lev 19:18) Who of us is able consistently to follow the ten commandments and the gospel imperatives?

As far as Paul was concerned, if you *really* let God's laws and expectations get under your skin, all you could really do is shut up and lay low, grateful you haven't been blown off the face of the earth. "Whatever the law says," argues Paul, "it speaks to those who are under the law so that *every mouth shall be silenced, and the whole world may be held accountable to God.*" (Ro 3:19). "There is no one who is righteous, not even one!" cry out the psalmist and Paul together.

It's a radical word from a pulpit but here it is: Stop trying to be good. If you think your actions gain you God's love, grace, forgiveness, or salvation, forget it. It ain't gonna happen. Why? Because, quite apart from our efforts, *it already has*. As a gracious gift and divine act 2,000 years ago, your salvation and mine, and well as that of all humanity and creation, have, already, through God's extraordinary expression of love in Christ Jesus, *been accomplished*. Which means, at least to Paul and Calvin and

me, that no amount of behaving, pleading or confessing can make God love us more, and no amount of sinning and brokenness can make God love us less.

How good do you have to be? If you think you can merit God's love and forgiveness, give it up. If you imagine you have to measure up to the love of God, let it go. God loves you already, and anyway.

The more pertinent question is not how you and I can earn God's love but how we will *respond* to it. For while the Reformers had no time for calcified systems of ranking sins or the unholy economics of making them go away, they were all about how we believers *respond* to the gift of salvation in Christ Jesus.

If, in your delight and gratitude for God's precious gift, you find yourself behaving generously, graciously, lovingly, why, then you're right on the Reformers' track. For so far as the Reformed tradition is concerned, rules of righteousness exist not for the purpose of *earning* God's favor so much as *responding* to God's grace.

Can you see the difference? Enough to let go of this Bible Belt's anxiety about salvation? Enough to receive God's love and forgiveness? Enough to behave with obedience, gratitude and praise? Now *that's* a question only *you* can answer.

To the glory of God. Amen.