

May 14th, 2023

1 Peter 3:13-22 “How Good Do We Have to Be?”

Are you ready for another preacher secret? I know it's only been a couple of weeks since I gave you the last one, but I'm feeling generous this morning. Besides, the Guild Of Marginally Ethical Preachers or “G.O.M.E.P.” as they're known, hasn't hunted me down to punish me for giving you the last one. I figured it's safe to let you in on another one. This is Preacher Secret #86 – “The best way to keep your people in line is to make sure they feel like they're not good enough.” “Good enough for what?” Good enough for *anything*. Here's example – Hey there loyal parishioner, do you set aside time every day for prayer and devotions? Yes? Okay. But for how long? Fifteen minutes? Pfft. Come on. You can do better than that. You should be at minimum clocking in thirty minutes. What time of day do you do this? Oh, afternoon? During your lunch break? That's cute. If you were *really* serious about your spiritual growth, you'd get up at 4:30 a.m. and put in 90 minutes. See? Never let people think that they're doing enough. Otherwise you'll lose control over your flock and they'll start thinking they can do things like skipping Sunday morning worship or something. Never let things get so loosey-goosey that folks start feeling good about the way they practice their faith. If you think I'm exaggerating, then you don't watch enough televangelists. And no, just because we're on Facebook Live doesn't make me one.

Probably the most widespread misunderstanding of what it means to be a Christian is that everything hinges on “being good.” It's all about improving our behavior and conforming to a particular set of standards. To complicate matters, the belief that it's all about being good often mutates into the belief that it's also about forcing *other* people to be good too. And that's when it gets messy, and you end up with events like the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, the Salem Witch Trials and various other blights on the history of the church. When the result of following Jesus is imposing our moral standards on the rest of the world by policing and punishing bad behavior, something is wrong. We're

missing the point. And let's be clear, this is true for many religious systems, not just Christianity. Last September, a young Iranian woman named Masha Imini died in police custody after being arrested for violating her country's Islamic dress code. Many religions in the world are guilty of violent repressive moral crusading. This is why religious nationalism is bad no matter what your religion. Just saying.

Here's something that may sound strange at first, but the call to follow Jesus is *not* a call to "be good." In fact, if it has anything at all to do with "being good," it's a call to *give up* trying to be good. But we don't always "get it" do we? This understanding that following Jesus equals being good is so widespread that it's almost regarded as common knowledge. That's when the average person says, "Oh yeah, of course that's what Christianity is all about! That's common knowledge." And one of the problems with what we think is "common knowledge" is that it colors the way we read the entire Bible even when something in the Bible challenges what we believe to be "common knowledge." Here's an example - In John's gospel, chapter 14 verse 15 Jesus says, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." Then later in verse 21 he says, "They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me." There you have it. If you want to follow Jesus, then you'd better buckle down, grit your teeth, and keep those commandments. Presumably all of them. The big ten *and* the 613 tertiary ones. Common knowledge, right? It sounds like the foundation of a solid moral code that has a strict focus on being good. But is this really what Jesus is trying to communicate? It doesn't say that if you love Jesus you need to *prove* it by working hard to keep the commandments. It says that if you love Jesus, then keeping the commandments is something that will happen without much effort. In other places in the Bible when Jesus is asked to sum up the commandments that matter most, he says it all comes down to this: Love God, and love one another, even your enemies. And for good measure, he says that everything else in the law and the prophets also comes down to those two things: Love God and love one another.

The trouble is that under the influence of this sneaky “common knowledge matrix” that we’ve invented, love just becomes one more thing that we have to buckle down, grit our teeth, and try really-really hard to do. It just becomes one more standard to try to reach or one more measure of whether we are being good or not which means, of course, one more thing to fail at and feel guilty about. That doesn’t sound like love at all, does it? The truth is that the capacity to love is not something we can make happen by grit and effort. It’s a gift. *And* this is a gift that we receive *as* we experience receiving love. It’s when we experience the transforming power of being loved deep down in our bones. Love comes naturally when we know we are loved. When we receive the gift of love, we are better able to share it.

Loving doesn’t even feel like a risk when we know we are loved. We can love in return without fear of rejection. It’s so painfully entertaining to watch teenagers when they fall in love for the first time. When this happens, the teenager sends their friends out on reconnaissance missions to learn how another person feels about them before taking the risk to approach that person themselves. If the intel report indicates that that the other person does like you, then suddenly it becomes a whole lot safer to approach that person yourself. If your intel specialist fails to get any information, it remains terrifying.

Knowing that we are loved is a wonderful gift that makes us feel ready to take on the world. When we know we are deeply and totally loved just for who we are and regardless of anything we do, we then find ourselves giving out love to those around us. We can give ourselves with reckless abandon because we don’t have to hoard love or desperately cling to love because it keeps coming to us perpetually. And of course, if we are loving in generous and bold ways, and love is the sum of the commandments, then being good will take care of itself as love flows freely.

Now this doesn’t mean we won’t get hurt. No one who follows Jesus and sees where he has gone could be under any illusion that there is no pain

on the pathway he has taken. But those who know that no amount of pain or rejection or even violence can separate them from the love of God are much more able to stand firm when the forces of hostility and hatred try to do their worst. Our reading from First Peter even spoke of the likelihood of such suffering and called on us to not fear and not be intimidated, but rather to stand firm in ‘the hope that is in us.’

Now, getting back to our “common knowledge” issue, hope is often seen as just another one of those things we think we have to grit our teeth and try really hard at. Either that or we think of it as nothing much more than wishful thinking. The kind of hope that Peter is talking about here is *not* like wishful thinking at all. Nor is it something we have to try hard to generate. Hope is a gift too. Hope is the spirit in which you are able to face the future when you know what is coming to you and you know that it is wonderful. Hope is not wishful thinking. Hope is the confidence of a person who knows that even though they are still a prisoner at this moment, their release has already been secured. The hope that Peter talks about is the confidence of knowing that Christ has already defeated the forces of hostility and death. We are not vaguely wishing he might. We know he already has, even if the news of his victory hasn’t reached everybody yet. We know that he has because he continues to live and to love freely and generously, even though humanity did its best to destroy him. We sought to snuff out his love and hope by putting him in the place where we thought all love and hope were extinguished, the place of utter rejection and humiliation and shame and death.

Society always has someone it has turned its back on and cast into that place. It’s what we do when we are anxiously trying to prove that we’re good – we label someone else as evil so that its clear that evil is them, not us – and we cast them into that horrible place of utter rejection. But Jesus stepped up and allowed us to cast him into that place ... that place we feared most ... that place of utter annihilation. And then he shocked us all by emerging three days later, scarred, yes -- but more alive than ever, and if anything, even more full to overflowing with love and mercy and grace than before. He is risen. (He is risen indeed.)

In our reading, Peter describes Christ as having descended to the dead, only to proclaim the good news to the prisoners there. It was the same good news he had been preaching all along – release for the prisoners and then emerging to new life, like Noah from the ark. So now, that place we feared so much has been exposed as having no real power other than the power that fear gave it. Jesus has shown that it is not so lethal after all. He calls us to follow him, to know ourselves to be loved and to boldly live as he lived and love as he loved, knowing that the worst that can possibly happen to us has already been shown to be perfectly survivable and not the least bit capable of removing us from either the love or the life of God. And because of that, Jesus is not in the least bit interested in us *trying* to “be good.” Because most human attempts to try to make ourselves look good usually end up labelling someone else as bad. And if *they* are the evil ones, then *we* must be the good ones and therefore we’re safe. Except that didn’t work out for Jesus. He died at the hands of those who labeled him “the bad guy” because he dared to say that the sum of all the law and prophets is, “Love God and love your neighbor.” Jesus, the most perfect embodiment of love that the world has even seen died at the hands of the ones who were sure that they were the “good guys,” thus proving that this whole “goodness project” was a miserable failure.

Trying to define and secure goodness for ourselves ends up destroying love itself. The point Peter is trying to make here is that Jesus wants us to follow him into the kind of love and hope that is a *gift* from God. One that is unearned and undeserved, but freely given and totally transforming. And if we will follow the crucified and risen Christ into that promised land where goodness will take care of itself and be born again in us as love, love and more love.