

Sermon 26, Be Good, Do Good, 1 John 3:7

Proposition: You can't be righteous without doing righteousness, and this is because Jesus was righteous and did righteousness and we want to imitate Him.

- I. The Lie: You Can Be Righteous Without Doing Righteousness
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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, I have frequently criticized in your hearing preaching of the form “be good, do good.” Yet those are the very words of my title this morning — and indeed, they are taken nearly verbatim from the text before us. At least, they are in the text, though in the opposite order: Do good, be good — “practice righteousness”, “is righteous”. The introduction, of course, is not the place for exposition. Nonetheless, let me just say now that the reason I criticize all such “do better, be better” preaching is that it is of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh. If all I offer you is “do better, be better” you can't and won't. Why? Because that preaching is law and the law gives you no power to do what it commands. The law does not offer life; you have to already have the life and the internal motive power to use your life to obey it.

But if all this is true, why on earth does John offer us a text which says “do good, be good”? The answer is that the good news is not an announcement but a person. The good news doesn't begin and end with “God forgives your sins.” The good news is that Jesus Christ is who He is and did what He did for us. In other words, the gospel includes everything relevant to Christ — including His law and the kind of people He wants His followers to be. What is the motive John presents us with in our text this morning? It is our desire to be like Christ. Brothers and sisters, is that a gospel motive? Is that based on the good news that Christ is for you, that He died for you, and that He lives for you? I daresay it is. What we will see in our text this morning, then, is that you can't be righteous without doing righteousness, and this is because Jesus was righteous and did righteousness and we want to imitate Him. Don't believe the liars. You can't be good without doing good!

I. The Lie: You Can Be Righteous Without Doing Righteousness

You see, the negation of that proposition is the fundamental lie, the fundamental deception, that John is warning against. The lie is that you can be good without doing good. Oh, what a fantastically attractive lie this is! If I can once sever what I am from what I do, I am home-free. To cut that link between being and doing is to make me free as a bird, untrammelled as the road. Because if that link is really severed, then I can be a loving husband even when I'm lusting after another woman, even when I'm speaking harshly to my wife, even when I'm spending our money on things that don't benefit the whole household. Why? Because what I do has no impact on what I am. I can be a good father even while yelling at my kids. I can be a good driver even while getting 3 DUIs in 6 months. I can be a good citizen while cheating on my taxes, a good church member while never attending worship, a good employee even though I spend 25% of the workday surfing the web, and on and on and on.

II. The Danger: Someone Might Make You Believe This Lie

So what's the danger? The danger is that someone might make you believe this lie! It is simultaneously recognizable as completely ridiculous and as the secret belief resident in every heart in this room. We all want to believe, and at some level do believe, that we are good drivers, that we are good workers, that we are good parents and spouses and citizens and in general pretty good at everything we do. At the same time, we reject this fantasy when it comes to others. If he doesn't treat me right, then he's not a good friend! If she doesn't respect me, then she's not a good wife! And so on.

A. Children Are Trusting

John addresses us once again as little children, indicating his love and care for us but also indicating his opinion of our deceit-resistance. Some people find it absolutely hilarious to play on the gullibility of little ones. I've always hated those people, and I think God does too. But that aside, some people think it's great to tell children that the carpet has poison in it, or that the moon is made of green cheese, or that Santa Claus is real and really comes down the chimney on Christmas Eve, or any of a million other lies both cultural and individual. And you know what? Children believe what they are told. They don't know any difference. They don't know any better. They take in what you tell them by your words and deeds. And that's what you and I are. We are little children when it comes to the spiritual life. If you think of yourself as a spiritual grand master, as someone immune from temptation and lies, then guess what? You have already swallowed one of the biggest lies that can fit through the human throat. Children are trusting. You're a child. It is, in other words, imperative that you pick the right people to trust.

B. Liars Abound

Because, as some of us have occasion to know all too well, liars abound. Don't let anyone deceive you, John commands us. Why? Because anyone could deceive you. There are a ton of liars out there — plenty of people who will affirm you in all kinds of evil activities. You can find support groups who will tell you that your affair is okay and is a wonderful venue for self-fulfillment and self-affirmation. You can find people who will take drugs with you. You can

find people who will shepherd you through the process of joining a criminal organization or cartel. You can find people who will encourage you to amputate your hand or burn or tattoo yourself, using “body modification” to express yourself more truly. There are a lot of liars out there who will tell you that you can be good even while you do evil.

Those are real dangers. But worse than all of them, and present in spades in our own Christian circles, are the people who deceive you from a different starting point. These are the heresy-hunters who cry “legalism!” and “spiritual abuse” whenever an authority figure such as myself says “You need to obey God. You need to stop dating that non-believer. You need to stop watching those TV shows. You need to stop sleeping with your girlfriend. You need to stop saying ‘Oh my God.’ You need to start submitting to your husband.” This crowd, the ecclesiastical version of the social justice warriors, are present in our circles. And guess what? They are ready to deceive you. They are ready to tell you that honest, sincere effort to obey God is “legalism.” Brothers and sisters, that’s garbage. That’s false teaching. Obeying God because you believe that you ought to obey Him, obeying your husband because you know that he is God’s official agent and representative in your life, obeying your elders because you know that they have authority over you to build up and not to tear down — this, my beloved, is not legalism. This is doing good because you are good.

Don’t let them lie to you. Don’t let them make you believe their lies. Legalism is *not* enforcing a Biblical standard within our church and community. Legalism is creating and enforcing an extra-Biblical standard, or looking to the keeping of any standard at all, biblical or not, to give you favor in the sight of God and save you. So if you say “Christians need to quit watching sex scenes” or “Christians need to stop drinking the feminist Kool-Aid that says that men and women weren’t made for each other” and a fellow Christian tells you “That’s legalism. Be quiet. Stop saying that” — don’t let that person deceive you! The person who does good is good; the person who refuses to do good is an evil person.

C. The Most Deceptive Person: Yourself

But though we need to beware of the deception of others and their ill-timed rebukes, or even their categorical affirmations of evil, the bottom line is that the person most likely to deceive you is you. You are the one who *wants* to believe that you are a good person even when you’re not doing good things. You are the one who would prefer to sever the link between being and doing. But in God’s economy, that link is unbreakable. You are what you do, morally speaking. If you do what’s right, then you are good. If you do what’s wrong, then you are evil.

So what about the Protestant dogma of justification by faith? Doesn’t that doctrine teach that God Himself severed the link between what you are and what you do? That He looked at the ungodly and counted them, or some of them, righteous? The answer is “No.” Not in the sense you’re thinking, anyway. God did not take evil people and say “These are morally good people.” That would be wrong. That would be a lie. And as our Catholic friends have taken every opportunity of pointing out for 500 years now, God cannot lie. God cannot look at evil people and say “These are good people.” So there we go, right? God doesn’t justify the ungodly, despite

what Paul says in Romans 4:5. God can't do that. So the verse must mean something else. And it does mean something else. I said a moment ago that God does not declare evil people to be *morally* good. But He does declare them to be *legally* good. Rome, when it interacts with distinction at all, declares it to be a distinction without a difference. But I think all of you can see the difference. To declare someone legally good is not at all the same thing as declaring him morally good. It is the same as the difference between declaring someone a legal child through adoption and declaring him a biological child through birth. Is the judge lying when he says, "Legally, this child is now yours by order of the court"? No, he's not! The judge is telling the truth because the court has the power to constitute this child as your child. And in the same way, God is telling the truth when He counts the ungodly as legally righteous. He is not saying "Joe Christian is now someone who did good things. His past misdeeds have been erased from existence." That would be God lying. But when Joe Christian is justified, is declared legally righteous, God *does* say "All of Joe Christian's old sins are erased from consideration." Though they are not erased from existence, in that the fact that Joe did all those things will remain a fact forever, yet as far as God is concerned those sins are gone, wiped out by the blood of Christ. "I no longer hold those sins against him, and I will not punish him for them. He is no longer a liar, murderer, homosexual, or thief." Does God have power to perform this identity change on Joe Christian? Praise Him, He does! God is not helpless, saying "I can't save Joe Unbeliever and make him into Joe Christian until he goes for a week without lying, sleeping with his boyfriend, or killing anyone." Not at all. God can take Joe Unbeliever in the midst of his sins and cover him with the righteousness of Jesus Christ, thus making him legally righteous and wiping out those past sins.

But now that Joe unbeliever has legally become Joe Christian, will he automatically do good things without trying? Of course not! Though his identity has changed, though he is legally a good person in Christ, in order to be morally better he needs to shape up. He needs to do what is right, and unless and until he does it, no one (including God) is going to believe his claim to be right.

Be good, do good! If you don't do good, then you aren't good. That is, you aren't morally good. You might be legally good, declared righteous by God Himself. But you now need to walk that out. You need to do good.

III. The Truth

This is the truth that John is pointing out to us. He states it negatively. But positively speaking, the truth is that the one who practices righteousness is righteous. The one who does good is good! So if you claim to be legally righteous, to have a new identity in Christ, then you need to do what's right and be righteous.

A. Practice Righteousness

This is a nonnegotiable part of Christianity. You must do what's right. You must obey God with heart, soul, mind, and strength. You must strive to do what's right. You need to practice righteousness.

B. Be Righteous

But that's not where it ends. Doing good is not enough to save you. Instead, you have to *be* good. And to change your being is not something you can do. You can change your doing. You have control over your activities, your behavior, your conduct. But you don't have control over what you are. The one who practices righteousness *is* righteous — legally righteous, and morally righteous too.

You see, God changes your legal status and makes you legally righteous. But He also changes your moral status and makes you morally righteous. We call this "sanctification." "God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth," Paul says (2 Thessalonians 2:13). Who makes you holy? The Holy Spirit. Who makes you good? The Holy Spirit.

God doesn't merely demand that you *do* good. He demands that you *be* good. And then He gives you the power to do good by making you good.

John doesn't say that the one who does what's right *becomes* righteous. He says that the one who does what's right *is* righteous. What's the difference between being and becoming? One is a stasis. The other is a change, a flux. You don't do good to become righteous. You do good because you are good. And if you don't do good, you're not good.

In other words, don't let anyone deceive you. The link between being and doing is alive and well. John is not telling us to become righteous; he is telling us to act on the righteous status we already have in Christ.

IV. The Model: The Righteousness of Jesus Christ

And when we do, our righteousness will be "just as" His righteousness. Augustine points out that our righteousness will not be just the same in every respect as the righteousness of Christ. Rather, ours will be a smaller copy, as if someone made a small model that was just like our church building. It's just like it, except that it's one-twentieth the size. And so is our righteousness. It's just like Christ's, except that it's a smaller copy.

Jesus was righteous and did righteousness. If you are in Him, then you are legally righteous through justification and morally righteous through sanctification. And that means that you need to work out your moral righteousness. If you have really been saved, start acting like it! And if you never start acting like it, then what do we know? That you're not saved. The one who is righteous does righteousness. First be good, then do good. Or, do good, and we'll know that you are good.

Do you want to be like Christ? Then obey Him and His Father. Imitating Him is a gospel motive. You should be good and do good because Jesus was good and did good, and in Him, you are good too. So start doing it. Don't let anyone lie to you about this. If you're a Christian, you can do good, should do good, must do good, will do good. So get after it. Amen.