

CRYING IN THE CHAPEL

AND OTHER MESSAGES

by

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CHAPTER FOUR

WHY BE GOOD?

“Now this elder son was in the field: and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard musick and dancing. And he called one of the servants, and asked what these things meant. And he said unto him, Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound. And he was angry, and would not go in: therefore came his father out, and in treated him. And he answering said to his father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends: But as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf” (Luke 15:25-30).

The urge to be bad is within us all, and if it doesn't break out in one form, it will break out in another. At our best, we are not very good. Even the apostle Paul, saint that he was, could say, **“When I would do good, evil is present with me.”** We are fighting evil on every side, and there is no rest from the battle.

Jesus fought evil on every side. He was not immune to the devil's temptations. Though He had no evil within, our Lord knows the difficulty of living right in a world that has gone wrong. It is not an easy task, but it is not an impossible task. The forces of evil surround us, and we are no match for them. **“We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places”** (Ephesians 6:12).

There is a tendency to let go, and the spirit is abroad more now than ever before. Many of us register the reflection of the poet who said:

When I was young and bold and strong
Right was right and wrong was wrong.
With plume on high and flag unfurled,
I rode away to right the world.
“Come out and fight, you dogs,” said I,
And wept there was but once to die.

But I am old, and good and bad
Are woven in a crazy plaid.
I sit and say, "The world is so,
And he is wise who lets it go."
A battle lost, a battle won,
The difference is very small, my son.

The elder son in this story had a right to complain, "Why be good?" The younger son had just returned from his sinful wanderings. The old father had gone berserk with joy and treated the prodigal son as if he were a hero. He had dressed him lavishly, and invited his friends to a party in his honor, and had killed the fatted calf. The younger son had broken the father's heart, spent the father's money, dragged the family name into the hog pen. Now he comes home and the old dwelling becomes alive with song and laughter. The elder son had been faithful to his father, milked the cows, raised the crops, and never given the old man a moment's trouble. And though we know that the elder brother had the wrong spirit, he certainly was justified in raising the issue in our text. "Why should I be good, Dad? I've kept your commandments, been a faithful worker, and you have never killed the fatted calf for me." It was a proper complaint.

Young people everywhere ask me this question, "Why be good?" The popular young people in our colleges and high schools are the ones who lower the bars and are not too picayunish over minor matters. They seem to be carefree and have no tension concerning what they do. Girls often say to me, "If one tries to be moral and Christian, one is not invited on dates. The fast girls get all the phone calls and invitations from the boys." Businessmen often feel this way. If they play the game according to the rules, it seems to have no glamour. The way to make a fast buck is to cheat a little, to be clever at the expense of unsuspecting customers. Partners in marriage are often perplexed with this problem. Why be good? Other couples are unfaithful to one another and lie to one another, and they seem to get along and be happy.

But people don't seem to realize that the game of life is a long one, and what seems to be getting away with sin is simply the patience of God at work, trying to retrieve the erring soul. The Old Testament writer described this when he said, "**Because judgment upon an evil work is not executed speedily, the hearts of men are set in them to do evil**" (Ecclesiastes 8:11).

In other words, because God doesn't judge the person immediately for his sin, he thinks, "I am getting away with it, and I will do it again." God help us to realize that "**whatsoever a man soweth, that shall be also reap.**" The mills of God grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly small. If there were no heaven, no hell, no judgment, it would still be sensible to do what is right. But there is a heaven and a hell and a judgment, and God is calling us to walk in the path of righteousness for His name's sake. I want to outline three reasons why we ought to be good.

I. BE GOOD BECAUSE YOU ARE LOOKING IN

You will always know yourself as no one else knows you. You may do things that no one else will discover, but you cannot run from yourself. If you leave town, you have to go along with yourself. If you change jobs, you are still you.

Someone remarked, “Wouldn’t it be wonderful if there were some way that one could take a vacation from himself?” But you cannot do that. You live in a secret world all your own, but you are there, and you know what you are and what you do. Reputation is what the world thinks about you; character is what God thinks about you.

Character is what you are in the dark. I heard a minister say once, “What you would do if you knew that no one would ever find it out — that’s what you are.” That’s enough to bring all of us to mourners’ benches.

When I was in my teens I had a sermon on the text, “**Be sure your sins will find you out.**” I guess every minister preaches on the text at one time or another. I preached it as if it read, “Be sure your sins will be found out.” While that is true, the teaching of this text does not deal with others finding you out. It says, “**Your sins will find you out.**”

If you justify your behavior, your conscience and your subconscious does not let you get away with it. Your sins will write their signature on your blood pressure; they will leave their mark on your nervous system. It will rob you of peace; it will rob you of sleep. It will make your life a walking nightmare. Do you remember Macbeth? He had killed Duncan and he tried to justify his sin. But he came to realize that he could not run from himself. Shakespeare has him say,

Methought I heard a voice cry, “Sleep no more.
Macbeth doth murder sleep.” The innocent sleep;
Macbeth shall sleep no more.

Later, Macbeth goes to a doctor and he said,

Cans’t thou not minister to a mind diseased,
Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow,
Raze out the written troubles of the brain,
And with some sweet oblivious antidote,
Cleanse the stuffed bosom of that perilous stuff,
Which weighs upon the heart?

That is the problem that Judas faced when he betrayed Christ. Judas did not commit his sin on the spur of the moment. The seeds of selfish deceit had been sown in the soil of the soul as long as he had lived. To be sure, he thought Christ would establish an earthly kingdom and he would be the treasurer. But the other disciples thought the same.

To begin with, Judas was no more ignoble and confused than the others. But he sold Jesus, and he couldn’t live with himself. Remorse set in swiftly, and he went back to the Pharisees. He threw the money on the floor and cried, “He was innocent; He never did a wrong thing in His life. He healed the sick and mended broken hearts; He opened blind eyes and wiped clouds out of human skies.”

But the Pharisees had no remedy for his bleeding heart. They said, “We didn’t shortchange you; see thou to that.” How wonderful if he could have come to Christ, instead of to the Pharisees.

Esau in the Old Testament faced the same problem. In an hour of weakness he dethroned the spirit and enthroned the flesh. He sacrificed the permanent upon the altar of the temporary. He sold his birthright for a bowl of chili. He was willing to take the cash and let the credit go.

When I was in my teens, I would call a youngster to the platform and make a proposition. I would say, "I have a dime that I will give you now, or if you wait until the end of the week I will give you a dollar. Which do you prefer?" Invariably the child would take the dime. He could not wait for the larger amount. Esau was in that frame of mind when he sold his birthright.

The Bible states that later he sought repentance with tears, but could not find it. That is, he sought to undo what he had done, but some things cannot be undone, no matter how sorry we are for having committed them.

If a Christian gets into a fight and loses his arm, God will forgive him for fighting, but sorrow for the fight does not restore the arm. He will be a one-armed Christian the rest of his life. If a Christian gets into a scuffle and he loses an eye, God will forgive him for the scuffle, but he will be a one-eyed Christian the rest of his life. There are some results of sin that are final, no matter how sorry you are for having done them or how much you repent. So you are the constant observer of your life.

You know what you think, what your ambition is in the secret of your heart. You will never have peace and effectiveness if you hide faults from others; for you cannot hide them from yourself.

That is why the poet said,

I have to live with myself, and so
I want to be fit for myself to know.
I want to be able as the days go by
Always to look myself straight in the eye.
I don't want to stand with the setting sun
And hate myself for the things I've done.

I don't want to keep in a closet shelf,
A lot of secrets about myself,
And kid myself as I come and go
Into thinking that nobody else will know
The kind of a man I am.
I don't want to dress myself in sham.

I want to walk out with head erect.
I want to gain all men's respect.
In this battle for pride and pelf,
I want to be able to like myself.
I don't want to think as I come and go
That I am bluster and bluff and an empty show.

I cannot hide myself from me.
I see what others may never see.
I know what others may never know;
So, whatever happens, I want to be
Self-respecting and conscience free.

II. BE GOOD BECAUSE OTHERS ARE LOOKING ON

Not only are you responsible for yourself, but the destiny of others depends on your conduct and character. We are so constituted that we influence friends, loved ones, children. The old adage, "It's my business what I do" is not actually true. You are interrelated. You are like a link in a chain. When you move, others move around you. Paul said, "**No man lives to himself, and no man dies to himself.**"

You are not living in a cave, you are in a glass house. As Shakespeare put it, "Life is a stage, and we are the players." We are performing before a live audience. Every move is significant; every word is important. That is one of the by-products of living. Immanuel Kant proposed what he called "the categorical imperative." It said this, "So live, that if everyone imitated you, it would bring the greatest good to the greatest number."

Doctor Truett tells the story of a revival in a certain town. He went to visit a young lawyer for the purpose of leading him to Christ. The young man was in attendance at every service. Doctor Truett outlined for him the plan of salvation. The young man said, "I admire the Christian life, but I don't think it is essential. Look at Judge A; he is a wonderful man, successful, kind, decent, ethical, and he isn't a Christian. If he can be one without religion, so can I."

Doctor Truett picked up his hat and made the young man promise that he would be in the service that night. He went to the office of the respectable judge and said, "Sir, I want to ask you a question. Is it right for any man to assume a course of conduct that would endanger the moral and spiritual status of another human being?" The old judge replied that it was not right.

Doctor Truett then related what the young lawyer had told him. The judge went to the open window, thought for a moment, and said, "Doctor Truett, I will be in your service tonight." When Doctor Truett gave the invitation for men to come forward and profess faith in Christ, the old judge was the first to come, and right behind him came the young lawyer.

We cannot escape this. Others are depending on us and are hitching their wagon to our star. The apostle Paul was very concerned about this. Once he went to buy some meat and he purchased some that had been offered to idols. He bought it because it was cheaper. The idols didn't mean anything to Paul. He didn't believe in them. They didn't change the flavor of the meat, even though they did change the price. But some young Christian was offended by Paul's conduct. When Paul heard about this he said, "**If eating meat offends my brother, I will eat no meat as long as the world stands**" (I Corinthians 8:13). Wouldn't it be wonderful if everyone came to the realization that he is his brother's keeper? This would end wars and poverty and crime.

I heard of a man who was driving leisurely down the highway. He came to a bridge and saw a man standing on the railing just about to jump off and commit suicide. The driver came to a screeching halt, just in time to pull the would-be suicide back and say to him, "What are you trying to do?" The distraught man replied, "Turn me loose. I want to end it all. I am tired of living; I don't have a friend in the world." The driver said, "I know you have been having a hard time. I know that life has been difficult for you. Come in my car and let's talk about it." So they got in the car and they talked for about thirty minutes; then both of them jumped off.

We are affecting people every day. Men all around us rise or fall because of our actions and words. Our conduct will be judged by its effect on others. There will be no excuse for being shoddy at this point. We are so prone to justify our conduct.

I heard of a little boy who was playing with a ball and bat. He would pitch the ball in the air and then swing at it. He missed the ball every time. An old man was standing by and watching. He moved near the boy and said, "Son, you are not a very good hitter." The little boy said, "No, but I'm sure a good pitcher." He thought that the fact that he was making himself miss made him a good pitcher. You cannot justify the mistakes and blunders of life in such a manner. May God help us to live right because of others.

One of the first songs I learned after becoming a Christian states adequately the point that I am trying to impress upon your minds in this hour:

I would be true
For there are those who trust me.
I would be pure,
For there are those who care.
I would be strong,
For there is much to suffer.
I would be brave,
For there is much to dare.

We are to be the salt of the earth. We have a responsibility to the world around us. We are to be the light of the world. Jesus told us to let our light shine so that men would see our good works and glorify our Father which is in heaven. We are encompassed with a great cloud of witnesses. Hold on, my Christian friends. Don't become weary in well doing; in due season we shall reap if we faint not. It is so easy to become discouraged and want to relax our grip on God. But hold on. God will vindicate your position before men and angels. The day will come when our patient continuance in doing good will pay off and glorify the Saviour.

III. BE GOOD BECAUSE GOD IS LOOKING DOWN

If everyone knew you as God knows you, would your friends still respect you? I often have thought to myself, *If everyone knew me as God knows me, would they still come to hear me preach?*

The issue is not primarily what others think about you – it is what God knows about you. If I know my heart, the ambition of my life is to be a good preacher. One can be a smart minister or a talented minister, but Paul told Timothy to be a **“good minister for Jesus Christ.”** I don’t have trouble building sermons or meeting people or making talks, but I have trouble being a good man. I would rather be a good man than to be a great man. You may hide many things from the others; you may hide some things from yourself (by rationalization and self-justification), but you hide nothing from God.

He knows the book of your life from cover to cover. He knows every chapter in the book. He knows every paragraph in the chapter; He knows every sentence in the paragraph; He knows every word in the sentence; He knows every letter in the word. Yea, even the blank spaces are known unto Him. He knows every thought, every sin, every evil, every ambition. He knows every weak moment, every iniquity, every hidden sin. Hagar in the desert said, **“Thou God seest me.”** David said, **“If I take the wings of the morning and fly to the uttermost parts of the earth, behold thou art there.”**

Three ghosts on a lonesome road,
Spoke each to one another;
“Whence comes that stain around your mouth
No other hand may cover?
From eating of forbidden fruit,
Brother, my brother.”

Three ghosts on a windless road,
Spoke each to one another;
“Whence came that red burn on your foot,
No ash or dust may cover?”
“I stamped a neighbor’s heart flame out,
Brother, my brother.”

Three ghosts on a sunless road,
Spoke each to one another.
“Whence came that mark upon your hand,
No lifted hand may cover?”
“From breaking of a woman’s heart,
Brother, my brother.”

Yet on the earth, clean men we walked,
Glutton, and thief, and lover.
White flesh and fair did hide our stains,
That no one may discover.
Naked the soul goes up to God,
Brother, my brother.

But we must remember that God is not looking down simply to snoop and pounce upon us with judgment. His abiding vigil is concerned with our spiritual growth.

“The eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the land, to show Himself strong to those whose hearts are perfect toward Him.” God in Christ was watching Peter when He could see Satan sifting him as wheat (blowing on him), but the Lord said, **“I am praying for you.”** So Christ sits at the right hand of God the Father making intercession for us. What a consoling and strengthening truth. Many of my friends pray for me daily. I know I have the prayers of my Mother. But the greatest comfort to my heart is to know that Jesus is praying for me at the right hand of God the Father.

We cannot be good in our own strength. Paul clearly taught this in the seventh chapter of Romans. He said, **“When I would do good, evil is present with me,”** and **“the good that I would I do not,”** but **“the evil which I would not do, that I do. . . . I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord”** (vv. 21, 19, 25). And that victory is ours in Christ.

The beginning step in being good is to become a Christian. Jesus dealt with the sin question on the cross. Sin is our biggest problem. You cannot fight and be victorious without the forgiveness of your sins and the power to begin over again. Goodness does not begin by quitting sin, but by allowing Christ to forgive it. **“In whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins”** (Colossians 1:14).

The writer of I John clearly taught this. **“If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. The blood of the Lord Jesus cleanses from all sin”** (1:8, 9, 7).

Goodness must have an inspiration, and Christ becomes our inspiration. When He resides in the heart, we try to live right for His Name’s sake, not because we are afraid of laws and penalties. We know that the reason Christ is against evil and sin is not because He doesn’t want us to have a good time, but because the thing we are engaging in will ultimately hurt us and hurt others. Goodness must become rooted in righteousness. Otherwise our righteousness is like filthy rags in the sight of God.

The beginning of goodness is salvation, and the continuance of goodness is sanctification. Sanctification is a Bible word for spiritual growth and development. Constant and patient following of Christ daily is the key to continued goodness. Goodness without Christ is the worst form of badness. So I plead with you tonight that you find the answer for sin in the person of Christ. He will release power in your life in order that you may overcome the evil that surrounds you, because unless you have within you that which is above you, you will be defeated by that which is around you.

~ end of chapter 4 ~

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