

TITUS 3:4-8

BE GOOD FOR GOODNESS' SAKE?

“When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works. These things are excellent and profitable for people.”¹

I confess my amusement at the annual antics of those benighted souls inveighing against Christmas. As regular as the sunrise these raucous harpies and harridans appear each Christmas to harangue the faithful and to spew their venomous invective against anything that might hint of worship of the Son of God. Employees working in the various retail businesses are instructed to avoid saying anything radical, such as “Merry Christmas.” Schools host winter festivals, but meticulously avoid any action that might even suggest approval of Christmas. One school in the States has students singing a song in praise of Allah, though the faculty is very careful not to permit the choir to sing a song that suggests praise to the Son of God. Politically motivated termagants twist and distort freedom to exclude even a hint of the religious foundations of the celebration of the birth of the Son of God.

As surely as smoke rises from the fire, our atheist friends are at it again. A group identified as American Atheists have rented a billboard inviting people to “Go ahead and skip church! Just be good for goodness’ sake.” Frankly, I’m always amused by billboard theology; and I’m especially amused by this particular effort—well, not the skipping church part. Candidly, if going to church is just a religious exercise and one fails to worship, then I do wonder why anyone would bother? If the act of attending a religious service is an effort to coerce God into accepting the individual, that is a futile effort. However, the final statement the atheists posted presents an impossibility—one cannot be “good for goodness sake.”

Jesus was approached on one occasion by a young man seeking comfort concerning his relationship to God. The young man was by his own admission religious. In the pericope Mark has recorded we read, “As [Jesus] was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, ‘Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ And Jesus said to him, ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone’” [MARK 10:17, 18].

Perhaps you recall the conclusion of that account. The young man insisted that he had kept all the Commandments of God. However, when challenged as to whether he was truly pursuing God with his whole heart or whether it was mostly show, “he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions” [MARK 10:23b].

The young man was more similar to us than we might care to imagine. I’m not suggesting that we are all religious—obviously atheists and practical atheists that live as though God is not a consideration are not particularly religious. What I do suggest is that this young man had created his own moral standard; and because he was creator of his moral code he was confident that he kept that code perfectly.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Wheaton: Good News Publishers, 2001. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

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It is obvious that all people do live by a moral code. Good and evil do exist; and the standard for determining what is good (and by exclusion what is evil) is defined by a moral code. Without a fixed standard, however, the world will quickly become a nasty place to live. Perhaps that explains why our world has become such a wicked place! People are controlled by how we feel rather than being controlled by what is good. It is fine to point to Jihadists and argue that they are driven by their emotions rather than reason, but college students in North America, politicians and even businesses make decisions on the basis of what they feel rather than what is right. Everyone gives assent to a fixed standard; but few are willing to live by a fixed standard.

If an individual identifies an action as “good,” they are admitting (if only tacitly) that they possess a moral code. If an individual truly believes there is no fixed standard, they must never use the terms “ought” or “should.” Otherwise, whatever it is that they are identifying as good would simply be—it could be neither good nor bad. If we are simply robots dancing to the music of DNA, then we are but animals acting on our urges and our feelings. We can justify every evil if there is no fixed standard. However, if there is no standard, why do even sociopaths attempt to justify their actions? In attempting to justify immoral actions, we almost always appeal to an alternative moral code to as cover for our choices.

- I left my husband because he didn't really love me like my boyfriend does!
- I didn't really steal from the company—they owed me for my hard work!
- I had an abortion because it's wrong to bring a Down syndrome child into the world!
- The speed limit doesn't apply in this case because I'm a careful driver!

Why did even atheists argue that the San Bernardino attacks were an unspeakable horror and use the term violence when describing these attacks? It is because they know in the deepest recesses of their hearts that there is a God who has decreed, “You shall not murder.” Why do people who reject the thought of God object when governments seize and squander moneys they have laboured to acquire? It is because they are convinced that there is a God who has warned, “You shall not steal.” Why should an atheist be wounded when a spouse cheats on their relationship? It is because in the furthest reaches of the mind that atheist knows that God has said, “You shall not commit adultery.”

Deep down we do believe in a moral objective. And Christmas is evidence that the moral objective does exist. Mankind was estranged from Holy God and incapable of doing anything to compel God to accept him. If there would be rapprochement between the Creator and His fallen creature, God would have to intervene. And that is what He did.

Christ the Lord became a man for one great, singular purpose—He was born that He might give His life as a sacrifice for sinful man. God's purpose in presenting His Son demonstrates that there is a fixed moral code. People are born in sin, and they go astray from their birth. Yet God in mercy has provided forgiveness through faith in the sacrifice and resurrection of His Son. Perhaps the greatest Christmas passage ever is found in **ROMANS 10:9-13**. There we read, “If you openly agree with God that Jesus is Master over your life, believing with all your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be set free. With the heart one believes and is made right with God and by agreeing one is set free.” That passage concludes by promising, “Everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord shall be set free.”

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Here is the point of this brief message. We who believe Christ the Lord do not do good works “for goodness sake”: rather, in thankful response to the moral Law Giver’s gift of freedom in His Son we do that which is good. Our actions reflect our relationship to the Living God. Indeed, long years before He was born, the prophet spoke of His coming, writing:

“To us a child is born,
to us a son is given;
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,
and his name shall be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the increase of his government and of peace
there will be no end.”

[ISAIAH 9:6, 7a]

Merry Christmas. May God bless us all. Amen.