

There Is Still None Good but God

Bill Fortenberry

I received the following response to my letter from a member of the New York Coalition of Reason:

"Goodness is defined as the willingness to work with others to elicit their best and to help life to flourish. Thus, any person can do good in this world. Your definition of good is too narrow, and in fact outside the mainstream of western religious and philosophical thought.

However, Christian theology, because of its roots in Greek and Persian philosophy, believes that there cannot be goodness in this world. This is nothing more than a cultural artifact, and if the early Christians had not know Greek philosophy they too would have disagreed with you."

[At this point the author included a long list of accusations against God, the Bible and Christianity which I will leave out for sake of brevity.]

"The poster put out by our affiliate group only says that there are one million of us (according to general statistics) in the New York area who are good every day without believing in a god who condemns children who don't believe in him. We build schools and hospitals, feed the hungry, work to set free the captive, clothe the naked, work for peace between nation and care for people not because we have to, or because we want reward of heaven or to avoid punishment like Christians, but because it is good to love our family. I didn't have to be told to love my neighbors, I simply did.

And yes some of these people may have lied, or cheated on their taxes, or stood up against the Republicans, but it is our humanness that gives us the power to recognize the goodness in others. That because we can choose to be good, others can as well. That sure we all make mistakes, but that doesn't mean we can't also bring goodness into the world. If the gods exist, they must by your definition be good, if devils exist, they must be evil, but only we have the power to choose....which makes our choice all the more precious.

It sounds like you have a pretty low opinion of others. I tell you, until you learn to love others as yourself, you can never experience the holy. You don't need a god to do that."

Here is my reply:

Dear Sir:

Thank you for responding to my previous letter. If you don't mind, I would like to take a moment to respond to some of the points which you have made. I appreciate the courtesy that you have shown me thus far, and I ask you to extend that same courtesy to this letter as well.

Let me begin by thanking you for providing your definition of goodness. Though it is certainly not a strict, dictionary definition, it is nonetheless a refreshing revelation that you have established a framework upon which you base your claims. There is, however, a fatal weakness in your infrastructure.

If goodness were based solely on one's own willingness to be good, then all of our jails would be empty, our policemen would be joining the unemployment line, and courtrooms would be transformed into bastions of education. Unfortunately, our jails are full, our police forces are fully staffed and judges and jurors must still pass sentences instead presenting lessons. These things stand in bold defiance of your definition: they are glaring evidences that desire alone is not enough to make one good.

In building upon your definition, you have come to the conclusion that anyone can do good; and if goodness were measured by your definition, I would have to agree with you. By your definition, even Hitler could be said to be a good man. He viewed his actions as necessary for the betterment of humanity; he believed that he was aiding the evolution of the human race and thus helping life to flourish, and he was willing to work with others in order to accomplish those goals.

Was Adolph Hitler a good man? I do not doubt that you could make a fine argument for his ability to accomplish good things, or that you could even find some great acts of selflessness which he may have done, but is that enough to make him good?

The point of the matter is that the advertisement did not state that there are one million New Yorkers who desire to be good or who do good things without God. It claimed that there are one million New Yorkers who ARE good without God.

When an apple develops a bad spot, one can no longer say that the apple is good. A bruised apple can be said to be somewhat good or even mostly good; but once tainted with bad, the apple is no longer good as a whole.

People are the same way. Once someone is tainted with sin, he can no longer claim to be good. All such claims are, in reality, mere comparisons of one's own wickedness against that of another. The murderer claims that he is good because he is not as bad as the serial killer in the next cell. The shoplifter claims that he is good because he is not as bad as the jewelry thief. The one cheating on his taxes claims that he is good because he is not as bad as the embezzler. The one who tells an occasional "white" lie claims that he is good because he is not as bad as the chronic liar. All human claims of goodness are of this sort. There is no one who is intrinsically good.

You claim that you did not have to be told to love your neighbor, but were you not taught that very thing many times throughout your life? I would venture to say that nearly every American has been taught this principle at several points in his life just as our fathers were before us and their fathers

before them. In fact, a direct line can be traced through each succeeding generation from the first presentation of this commandment in the book of Leviticus to its utterance by your own lips.

To truly prove your claim that the love of one's neighbor is intrinsic to human kind, you should demonstrate the great amount of neighborly love present in one who has never heard of the God of the Bible. Where would you be most likely to find such a person? Surely not in America, nor even in Europe. No, to find one untouched by the influence of the Bible, you would have to travel to the darkest interior of Africa or perhaps to the deepest jungles of South America. And what do you suppose that we would find among these people so ignorant of the Word of God with only their own imaginations to guide their beliefs? Do we find such civilizations to be grand utopias of harmony and bliss? Nay, but we find them to be eating rather than loving their neighbors. And thus we find it true that neighborly love, rather than being an integral part of the human condition, is instead directly proportional to one's exposure to the teachings of the Bible.

I challenge you to consider well what I have said: to take your time and think it through. Don't be so hasty to point your finger at the wickedness of others, that you become blind to the truth about yourself. Can you really claim to be good without God? Did you truly develop your own goodness without the aid or the influence of the Bible? When you can answer these questions honestly, I ask that you write me back and share with me the results.

As always, I write sincerely in Christ,

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