

The 'Goodness' Question

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[0 : 0 0] Now, we're going to turn in our Bibles to that passage that we've just read from Luke 18, from verse 18 to 27. That's on page 1052. We're going to, as a church through the summer, think about some of the questions that Jesus asked during His ministry.

I imagine we all know the power of a good question when we think about the conversations that we find ourselves in. When someone asks that really good question that invites personal reflection, that allows us to reveal more of ourselves, that builds our relationship, and we understand that.

Jesus is someone who knew the power of a good question. Randy Newman, who died this year, wrote a really helpful book called Questioning Evangelism, recognizing that Jesus drew on a standard practice of the rabbis in asking lots of questions as He interacted with people, often doing something that we never usually permit, answering a question with a question of His own, and we're going to see one of those this evening. The questions of Jesus are so helpful for us, because as He meets with different people and He asks those questions, He's inviting people to reflect, to think about what's going on in their hearts, and by extension, what's going on in our hearts, to probe some of those assumptions that people have, to encourage personal exploration of beliefs, sometimes to prepare the ground for faith in Jesus. So each week what we're going to do is we're going to choose a different question, and we're going to think about how and why Jesus used this question, think about what does it ask of us, and also hopefully draw some lessons from Jesus' method and mission for our own mission. So this week we come to the goodness question. It's there in verse 19, why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. So we're going to begin with the goodness question, and then move on and think about the goodness challenge, and then think about the goodness of grace at the end. So verses 18 to 20. Now let's think together about the goodness question. Before we get to Jesus' question, there's a question that is asked of Him. Who asks the first question?

Luke tells us a certain ruler asked Him. So when we hear ruler in the Gospels, we're thinking of a religious ruler, so one of the leading teachers, perhaps in a synagogue, a key religious figure. We discover some other things about him. We discovered in verse 23 that he's a very wealthy man. He's clearly successful and prospering. When Mark records the story in his Gospel, Mark chapter 10, we discover that he is a young ruler. He is someone who comes running to Jesus. So he's in the prime of life. He's fit. He's healthy. He's eager to meet Jesus. All that to say he is a man to admire. He is somebody people would look at him and think, there's a guy who's made it. He's got health. He's got wealth.

[3 : 4 0] He's got honor and status. He's got religious learning. He's got sincerity of faith. A man to admire. And he asks a great question, doesn't he? He asks a question in verse 18, good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life? Now, sometimes when the religious leaders came and they asked questions of Jesus, they did it because they had an agenda. They wanted to trap or trick Jesus. Not so with this man. We don't get any sense of that. We sense sincerity. We sense eagerness.

Here is a man who is deeply concerned and interested in eternal issues. And if we think about this as Christians, wouldn't we love to have someone ask us this question? When was the last time you were having a conversation with someone who wasn't a Christian and they asked this kind of a thing, with this kind of spiritual interest? We would love this. We probably find ourselves praying for our friends and neighbors to be asking just this kind of question. And when we think about that, perhaps it strikes us as unusual, surprising, that Jesus actually doesn't give a direct answer, does he? What must I do? Jesus replied, why do you call me good?

Again, just to take a step back, for us, somebody asked, what must we do to inherit eternal life? We might well jump at that kind of question. There's lots of places we might go. We might quote John

3.16.

We might remind people that God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes might not perish but have everlasting life. So, we might encourage someone to believe in Jesus. And of course, that's a really good answer, isn't it? We might draw on Jesus' own message or the summary of Jesus' message, repent and believe the good news because the kingdom of God is near.

Talk about Jesus, the one who brings good news because he is God's king and he's come to save. Perhaps we might talk about the ABCs of the gospel, helping someone to accept that they are a sinner, encouraging someone to believe that Jesus is the Son of God and the Savior of the world, impressing upon people the need to come to him in faith. That'd be absolutely valid and really helpful.

[6:19] Maybe we'd give someone the big picture of the gospel, speak to them about the eternal God who is holy and the creator of all things, including us. To talk about people made in the image of God, made to worship God, to know God, but fallen into sin. To speak about Jesus, God's gift, the necessary substitute for sinful humanity, to talk about his sacrifice on the cross and his resurrection, and to encourage people to that response, to repent and believe. And again, that'd be a really helpful thing to point people towards. But that's not where Jesus goes in the first instance. It's not what Jesus does. So we need to ask ourselves, why doesn't Jesus answer the question directly? Why does he answer the question with a question of his own?

We come to this goodness question. It's a really powerful question, actually, especially as we understand that Jesus knows this man's heart and understands what's necessary to bring lasting change. So we're going to think about the goodness question here to think about the four levels that we can see within it. Here, I think, is the first level. Jesus is inviting the man to ask himself the question, what is true goodness? It's as if Jesus is saying, you're very quick to call me good. Have you really thought about what goodness means? Sometimes we're quick to use good without necessarily thinking about what it means. Just by way of illustration, there are good schoolboy footballers. Probably if you think back to your school days, or if you're in school, you can think about some footballers who are good. There's good schoolboy footballers, and then there's Laminya Mal. He just won the Euros, age 17, still doing his homework, and winning major medals. There are good meals, and then there's Michelin star fine dining.

So we can be really quick to ascribe goodness, and sometimes that means we set the bar of goodness too low. That can be true of football. It can be true of food. It can also be true when it comes to character and to our view of self. And so one thing Jesus certainly wants this man to do is to think about what is goodness truly. Another time Jesus does this is when he's teaching on the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus begins to apply the Ten Commandments. He makes a really important shift. He moves away from merely external acts to consider that obedience of the commands involves the inner thoughts and motivations. And we'll think about that in a few minutes. But here what Jesus does is he takes the goodness question to the realm of ultimate goodness. Have you considered that only God is truly good? So that's the first level of this question. The second level, and it's related, is what are the consequences if only God is truly good? And this is where Jesus is really challenging the man's worldview. A worldview likely steeped in legalism. This challenge is a view that says, my religion, my moral performance can be good enough to please a holy God and to inherit eternal life.

For us, it maybe has a different challenge. It challenges modern relativism. You know, the idea that there's no such thing as absolute truth. Nobody has the right to impose their morality on someone else. That's really challenged if we recognize that there is an absolute authority. He's the good God. Jesus, in asking this question, wants this very sincere religious man to understand. He cannot say, I am a good person worthy of eternal life unless he's willing to say, my goodness is as good as that of God. Unless we are ready to say that we are equal to God in goodness, holiness, and righteousness, there are significant consequences in affirming that only God is truly good. good. Here's a third level to the question. What does it say about Jesus if he is truly good?

[11:26] So sometimes people read at the beginning of verse 19 and say, well, here's Jesus saying he's not really God. You know, why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.

But he's not saying that. He's not saying I'm not God. Rather, we can hear Jesus saying implicitly, since I am God, do you understand that I am goodness personified? If you want to see what goodness looks like, in other words, you need to look at me. That's what Jesus says.

If we are to borrow from the beginning of John's gospel, Jesus is the Word who came from God, who is God, who became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we have seen his glory, we have seen his goodness. The goodness of the one and only God is seen in Jesus. God's goodness is seen in all of the actions of Jesus. When we witness the compassion of Jesus that heals the sick, it's the goodness of God.

When we discover his mercy that forgives, it's the goodness of God. When we go to the cross and see his love that sacrifices for sinners, it's the goodness of God. There's goodness in all of the words of Jesus.

Jesus. Every word is true. Every word is a true and accurate reflection of the character of God and reveals the plan of salvation from God to us. And there is goodness in the words of Jesus, the goodness of God in the words of Jesus, as he calls people, as he invites us by grace to enter into relationship.

[13 : 23] with the living God. And not only in his words and actions, we discover there is goodness in the heart of Jesus, goodness in the desires of Jesus, because he makes plain in so many places that he always lives to seek the glory of his Father. He comes as a king, but he doesn't use his power for himself. Rather, he is a king who comes as a servant. He is a king who comes to serve, to suffer, to die, and all of that motivated by love for a broken world. Jesus is the goodness of God.

So, when we think about the goodness question for ourselves, if we are to understand what goodness is, what goodness looks like, it becomes a matter of looking to Jesus, listening to Jesus, learning from him, and learning to love him as the goodness of God in the flesh.

One last level to the question that Jesus asked the man, what response do we need to make if we understand true goodness? Like, here again is that the power of Jesus' question, there's this invitation to the rich ruler to reflect upon the character of God. When we think about the goodness of God, we're not thinking in relative terms, comparing somebody who's a bit like us, but maybe slightly better. He is absolute in his goodness. He is the gold standard by which everyone else is compared against, weighed up against. He is absolute. The goodness that we have is relative at best.

It's always tainted. It's always impure compared to the perfect purity of God. So, Jesus wants the man to take way more seriously the holy goodness of God, to understand he can never by himself hope to inherit eternal life. But he also wants him to reflect more deeply and honestly about his own character and way of life. And that's why Jesus, in verse 20, begins to quote from table two of the Ten Commandments. He says to him, you know the commandments. And then he begins to list them.

And remember that when Jesus teaches about the commandments, he's not just thinking about the act, he's thinking about the heart, the motive behind the act. You know the commandments, you shall not commit adultery. Not just the act, but the act, the thought of lust, to create an object of desire in someone else.

[16 : 21] You shall not murder. Again, not just the act, but the hatred that we find in our heart, the anger, the wishing someone harm. You shall not steal is about more than just financial theft.

It's whenever we steal time. It's whenever we steal someone's good name. You shall not give false testimony. It extends beyond simply the testimony we give in a law court. It applies to those half-truths, to the gossip and slander, to the stories that we twist so that we always appear in the best possible light. Honor your father and your mother. It isn't just something for children. It's not just something while we live under our parents' roofs. It's respect, appreciation, thankfulness, always.

And as Jesus asks this question, and as its power begins to work in the man, and hopefully in us as well, it should always have that purpose of helping us to mind the gap. London train, mind the gap. Except here is this grand canyon-sized gulf between God's holy goodness and our best efforts at goodness.

Why does he answer the question with a question? Because he sees the man's heart. He knows that the man needs to be challenged. Because until he recognizes, and until we recognize our lack of true goodness, if we think ourselves basically good, then we will never see the need of forgiveness. We will never see salvation as something that's for us. We will never see the coming of Jesus, the sacrifice of Jesus as something that's a big deal. Just before we move on from the question, I think as Christians, I think as the church, we can learn from Jesus that we need to, with Jesus' help, help others to see that God is real, that there is an absolute standard, that there is an

absolute authority. We can learn to develop the art of asking good questions, that probe motivations and attitudes, that probe the conscience.

And also, as we want people to see that the difference between our goodness and true goodness, we want to introduce people to Jesus in the gospel, to really see what goodness looks like that people might be drawn to him. So, that's the goodness question. But the conversation continues, and so we need to think about the goodness challenge, verses 21 to 25. We understand that the man has a problem of legalism in the answer that he gives, all these I have kept since I was a boy. We can think of legalism functioning like a coat of armor in the olden days, or a bulletproof vest. It serves to stop the Word of God from penetrating. The law of God, the good news of the gospel of God, they just don't reach the heart. This is something I know from personal experience, perhaps. [19:54] You have a similar experience. I grew up hearing God's Word, hearing the gospel, week by week in church, and in Sunday school, and in a Bible club.

But for most of my childhood, it never reached my heart. And so, I found myself, rather than comparing against God, I'd always be comparing against others, and feeling like I was doing pretty well morally, so tended very easily towards pride and being judgmental. Hearing the gospel of God's grace, but still imagining and acting in day-to-day life as if eternal life was something to earn, so that life became a roller coaster of pride and despair.

That whereas grace invites us into joy, my understanding of religion was that it was about duty and performance, and it was really dull. I imagine that this young ruler could resonate with that. All these I have kept since I was a boy. The reality of God's holiness, the nature of human sinfulness, they have not reached this man's heart as yet. He can listen to Jesus say, no one is good except God alone, and he still thinks that he measures up. When it comes to the law, I am fine.

In verse 22, Jesus is going to continue speaking. In Mark's gospel, again, we're introduced to the heart of Jesus. Now, we're told that Jesus looked at him and loved him, and that's why he speaks the way he does. It's something that love does. Love speaks hard things. We speak the truth in love.

[21:55] He challenges his idea of goodness because he loves him and because he wants him to change.

He doesn't want to give easy answers. He needs a total change of heart. So, the man's heart is the target in what Jesus is going to say next. Verse 22, you still lack one thing. What is the one thing that this man lacks? You still lack one thing. The one thing that this man lacks is true love. Jesus is about to show him through what he says next that he doesn't truly love God, and he doesn't truly love his neighbor. These are challenging words for this man here in verse 22. So, let's hear them. So, he says, you still lack one thing. First thing he says to him next is then, sell everything you have. So, remember, Jesus knows this man's heart. This is a specific conversation.

This isn't saying universally that every Christian has to take a vow of poverty and sell their possessions. But Jesus knows this man's heart. And for this man, wealth was his idol. While he claimed to be keeping all the commandments, Jesus knows his heart that he is breaking the first commandment because he is worshiping something other than the true and living God because he's worshiping his money. And Jesus recognized money as probably the dominant idol that can wreck people's hearts and lives. He said, you cannot serve God and money. And so, Jesus uses this conversation to expose to the man the reality that in truth, he loves his money more than he loves his God.

Religiously, full of sincerity, recognized as a top quality Bible teacher, admired in the community, guilty, but he's guilty of idolatry. And he doesn't truly love God. Jesus probes deeper, sell everything you have. Secondly, give to the poor. So, not only is Jesus saying in this, you don't love God, you actually don't love your neighbor either. The God of heaven has given you your resources, but rather than steward them for the sake of others, you're hoarding them for yourself.

[24:41] You don't care for the poor out of your wealth. You don't love God. You don't love your neighbor. You're not keeping the commandments. The third part of what Jesus says comes with the promise, you will have treasure in heaven. Remember, he asked the question, what must I do to inherit eternal life?

If you want eternal life, you must change your values. Jesus knows he'll never truly want eternal life when he's placing all his hope in riches now. Again, going back to the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 6, 19 and 20, Jesus said, don't store up for yourself treasure on earth. Why? Because it

doesn't last.

Rather, store up for yourself treasure in heaven, because where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Jesus knows fine well his treasure is in his bank account.

It's the money that he's stored up at home rather than seeking for eternity. And then the last thing that Jesus says to him is, then come follow me. And again, this is probing the man's heart because this is a call to loyalty towards Jesus, to become a disciple of Jesus, to acknowledge Jesus is Lord. So he says to this rich young ruler, will you serve me? Will you recognize me as good, as your Lord, and will you follow me? Will you have your identity shaped by Jesus, not your performance, not your wealth, not your status, but by coming to trust in Jesus?

[26 : 49] And we see in verse 23 that Jesus' words have hit their target. When the man heard this, he became very sad because he was very wealthy. So now there is sorrow. Now he sees the gap now he's beginning to understand, I'm not the man I thought I was. My goodness, it is relative. It's not good enough for God. Now he's beginning to sense his need. Now he's hearing the challenge of discipleship. He's not yet ready to follow Jesus. But Jesus' words have hit their target.

And it's really interesting, the early church, the early church identify this rich young ruler as Joseph of Arimathea. Joseph who cared for the body of Jesus, who identified himself at that moment as a follower of Jesus. So the early church evidence suggests that these words did in the end lead to lasting transformation, but not just yet. Verse 24, Jesus looked at the man and said, how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. Indeed, it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God. And Jesus in this word picture makes clear that the kind of change that is required to enter the kingdom, to receive eternal life, it's humanly impossible. Left to ourselves, we will, like this rich man, never be able to get rid of our idols. Left to ourselves, this man would know what he needed to do, but he would be unable to get rid of his idol of wealth. And left to ourselves, neither would we. Left to ourselves, we would never turn to trust in the one who is truly good. Rather, we would continue to imagine that somehow, some way, we could be good enough for a perfectly good and holy God. Without the work of God to transform our view of goodness, we would never get it. We would never enter the kingdom.

YouTube is full of, my YouTube anyway, is full of these videos. Guys on a sports field who think they're pretty good at a particular sport, football, basketball, that kind of thing. And maybe they're playing in a local field, and an ex-professional turns up to play with them. Or sometimes in American sports, a professional will disguise himself and then show up to play with a group of guys. And what happens without fail is that within a matter of seconds, certainly by a matter of minutes, it becomes pretty obvious that their idea of being fairly good local players now has to be utterly redefined as they meet someone who is actually good.

And the goodness of Jesus, it lies in that kind of challenge. It is good that Jesus redefines the rich ruler's definition of goodness.

Because if Jesus hadn't challenged him, he would have gone away thinking, yeah, I'm a good guy. I keep the commandments, therefore God will be happy with me, therefore the kingdom of God will be mine.

It is the goodness of Jesus when he uses God's law to cut to the heart of our heart problem.

[31 : 08] When he uses the law to show us that all is not well between us and God when we are without Jesus. Because it's the same as with our medical health. Knowing that we are sick is kind of stage one, isn't it, to receiving the cure that we need. So again, to think about what can we learn from Jesus when we speak about faith.

Following the pattern of Jesus, we want to love people enough to speak the truth. Not just to give easy, comfortable answers.

We want to be people who are used by God to redefine categories as we would bring the true goodness of God God before others. That leads us to our final thing, to think about the goodness of grace.

This is really interesting having had this conversation. We then, it's like the camera pans back and we see there's people watching. Verse 26, those who heard this asked, who then can be saved? The crowd are stunned. In a moment their world view has been turned upside down by this goodness question. As they looked around their society with their understanding of how the world worked, if you had health and wealth and success and if you were sincere and if you were teaching the Bible and if you had a position of authority, then that was a clear sign of God's blessing. If anyone's in, it's this guy. So all of a sudden through this question, their whole idea is being shifted

upside down. And again, it speaks, doesn't it, to the power of the goodness question. Because now it's revealing the truth of Romans 3, verse 23, that no one is righteous, not even one. Now the wider crowd are beginning to understand. A person's background or religious knowledge or practice or wealth or status, that has nothing to do with knowing God or inheriting eternal life. It's something entirely different because it's something outside of us.

[33 : 29] So are we left utterly hopeless? Are we left with a sickness with no cure? Are we left to know that we can't be good enough for God? So why even bother? No, Jesus continues, verse 27, with words that speak such hope and promise and comfort. Jesus replied, what is impossible with man is possible with God.

Here is a good truth. The goodness of God's grace makes the impossible possible. How does it work? Think of who is speaking. This is Jesus, who is true goodness, because he is God. The one who is true goodness hasn't stayed at a distance. Rather, he's become one of us. And while he lived on this earth, he lived a life of perfect goodness. He and he alone earned the right to eternal life by his perfect righteousness. What Jesus did is so wonderful. He gave his life as that necessary substitute.

And there is this great exchange that takes place where Jesus takes our sin and our law-breaking on himself. And in exchange, he credits to us his perfect righteousness. That he dies so that we might live.

By grace, he dies for lawbreakers, for our pride, for our idolatry, for our lack of love.

[35 : 16] And by grace, he invites us to receive the kingdom of God, entry to life with God as a gift. Or as he's previously said in verse 17, I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it. So we receive as a gift. But only when we learn to lay our deadly doing down, down at Jesus' feet, rest in him, in him alone, gloriously complete.

The goodness of God is that he leaves us in no doubt that eternal life will never come on the basis of our own goodness. Jesus delivers a really realistic message when we take a moment to examine ourselves. But it becomes a hope-filled message because the one who speaks really is God, really is good, and his good work of salvation means we can inherit the gift of eternal life. His way of grace saves us from those cycles of pride and despair and trying to prove ourselves. And there is entry to life with God. We can receive eternal life when we see and believe that Jesus is our good God and Savior. Let's pray.