

In Defense of Good People

As Jesus left the crowds and went up on the mountain, his disciples came to him to hear more of his teaching. Let us imagine that a few curious scribes followed behind and stood sheepishly at a distance listening for anything they could criticize. Jesus had hardly warmed into his discourse when they heard him declare, "*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God*" (Matt. 5:8).

"Stop there, young man!" the disciples are startled by the yell of one of the scribes, "if you were teacher from God, you would know that David declared, '*They have all gone astray; they are all alike corrupt; there is none that does good, no, not one!*'" (Psa. 14:3); no one can be pure in heart!" The scribe's voice still echoes through the hills of time!

That message rings from pulpits today! It is popular to join in painting over all people with the same broad brush in the darkest of colors. Though they do not say it, preachers imply that Jesus was out of bounds in indicating that one could be pure in heart. A paper before me declares, "Because of the fall, man is unable to savingly believe the gospel. The sinner is dead, blind, and deaf to the things of God; his heart is deceitful and desperately corrupt." We ask: Was Jesus pointing to an impossible goal?

Jesus knew the account of Adam and Eve and "the fall", but we have no record of Jesus or any inspired writer using it to indicate that mankind deserved such a description. We had to wait for theologians to declare man as inherently corrupt. In next week's essay we will ask "Really?" and will deal with David's appraisal. Jesus pronounced a blessing on those who are pure in heart. Instead of branding all mankind as having desperately corrupt hearts, we serve better in joining Jesus in the defense of good people and in encouraging purity of heart.

Hear David in another setting: "*Who shall ascend into the hill of Jehovah! And who shall stand in his holy place? He that hath clean hands and a pure heart...*" (Psa. 24:4). Paul urged Timothy, "*Keep yourself pure*" (1 Tim. 5:22). He had already stated, "*The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and sincere faith*" (1 Tim. 1:5). "*Jesus saw Nathaniel coming to him, and said of him, 'Behold, an Israelite indeed in whom is no guile'*" (John 1:47).

Purity of heart, good conscience, and sincerity are closely related, if not synonymous. Peter wrote to some "*.. having purified your souls by the obedience to the truth for a sincere love of the brethren, love one another earnestly from the heart.*" And he urges, "*Put away all malice and all guile and insincerity and all envy and all slander*" (1 Peter 1:22; 2:1). Was Peter torturing his readers with an impossible demand? Have you never known good people who have done what Peter prescribed? If not, I pity you! I have known many loving, sincere, and conscientious people whose earnest and constant desire was to do the will of God. None of these were perfect but they were constantly being purified. To say that they are all desperately corrupt is to slander God's good people.

Being uninformed, misinformed, or incapable of understanding matters of teaching is not a defect of the heart. The most sincere, conscientious, zealous, and pure heart is not corrupted by that of which that person is incapable.

The paper quoted above continues: “His will is not free; it is in bondage to his evil nature, therefore he will not – indeed he cannot – choose good over evil in the spiritual realm. Consequently, it takes much more than the Spirit’s assistance to bring a sinner to Christ – it takes regeneration by which the Spirit makes the sinner alive and gives him a new nature. Faith is not something man contributes to salvation but is itself a part of God’s gift of salvation – it is God’s gift to the sinner, not the sinner’s gift to God.” Such an expression is a total fabrication of the theologian which cannot be drawn from the Genesis account of “the fall” or any other inspired writing.

In Romans, Chapters 1 and 2, Paul definitely indicates that God expected that even those who had no revelation should recognize him in nature and respond to him. In 2:14-15 he concludes, “*When Gentiles who have not the law do by nature what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and the conflicting thoughts accuse of perhaps excuse them ...*” “By nature!” Does Paul indicate a totally corrupt nature?

If the unregenerate man cannot choose good, then why preach the Gospel to him? The exhortations of inspired writers would be futile. Concerning all of mankind, God determined that as groping blind men “.. they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him and find him” (Acts 17:22-31). No one contends that a person can remit his guilt by his good works, but that is not denying that he can do good works. A person cannot believe strongly enough to save himself for that would be meritorious. He can only believe enough to submit to God in accepting his grace through obedience.

Do you deny that an atheist can demonstrate love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, fidelity, gentleness, and self-control – “*the fruit of the spirit?*” Don’t display arrogance here! Atheists can choose to do good. Paul was not saying only those who have the Holy Spirit can bear such fruit in Galatians 5:16-26. He is contrasting the life motivated by selfish, physical desires with that of inward conscience and purity of heart. In these passages “spirit” should not be capitalized for it refers to the spiritual nature of man. If man cannot choose his course, then he bears no responsibility for his conduct. Secular humanism is going in that same direction by route of cause-effect determinism while leaving God out.

A statement by Charles Spurgeon was sent to me. It declared that the gospel preaching is this: “You are a lost sinner and deserve nothing of God but His displeasure; if you are to be saved, it must be by an act of sovereign grace. God must freely extend the silver scepter of His love to you, for you are a guilty wretch who deserves to be sent to the lowest hell. Your best works are so full of sin that they can in no way save you. To the free mercy of God, you owe it all.” If my parents brought me into this world in the midst

of disease in which I was crippled by polio, would I deserve nothing of them but their displeasure, rejection, and even destruction? If God brought me into this world without consulting me while imposing on me the guilt of Adam, thus making me a guilty wretch, would I deserve nothing of him but his displeasure? And could that be part of the good news – the gospel?

As Adam blamed Eve, and Eve blamed the snake, so we blame Adam, Eve, the snake, and God for the human condition. Both the wise and the not so wise have pondered these matters since the days of Job. Who am I to explain it all? I do take some comfort in the conclusion reached by someone wiser than I: *“This only have I found: God made mankind upright, but men have gone in search of many schemes (many devices / inventions)”* (Ecc. 7:29). Only an evil deity would make mankind corrupt.

Allegorically, Adam may be typical of us as we came into this world upright / innocent but took advantage of our freedom to do our own thing. Like Adam, also, the choice to serve our own desires was out of temptation rather than out of depravity. Both he and we came into this world in innocence. The Genesis account makes no mention of Adam’s sin or guilt being passed on to his descendents. Our Father does not produce depraved children!

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” []

Next week: *“‘None Is Righteous, No, Not One.’ Really?”*

(Cecil Hook; May 2005)

Talkin’ Texas: The world’s first rodeo was in Pecos, Texas, July 4, 1883.