

Introduction

Stupid inanimate objects. You all know what I'm talking about. Your shoelace breaks. The ATM swallows your card and keeps your money. Your tire goes flat on the way to work. Your hard drive crashes. And on it goes. Those things happen to everyone and we know how people usually respond when they do. They get mad and, in a delusional moment, get even with the inanimate object by calling it "**stupid**" or even kicking, hitting, or throwing it, which makes me wonder. Did Jesus do that? Years ago, I hit my thumb nailing something into place, got mad, and cried out, "**Stupid hammer.**" Jesus the carpenter hit His with a hammer more than once I'm sure. How many times do you suppose He did what I did, got mad and called it stupid? The answer is, "**None.**"

That's because He was the best "good person" who ever lived, utterly good in fact, and that's what I'm going to preach about today.

Jesus Didn't Grow in Goodness

Luke 2:41-52 is a unique text. It tells us all that we know about Jesus between the time of His birth and the age of 30.

According to verses 41-51, Joseph and Mary took their 12 year-old son Jesus on their annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of Passover. To protect themselves from highway robbers, they went, as they always did, with a caravan of family and friends. After the Feast was over, Joseph and Mary and their caravan left for home, but Jesus remained behind. They didn't know He did though, assuming Him to be with family or friends as they traveled. When they discovered He wasn't, they frantically returned to Jerusalem to find Him.

And they did – in the temple. Others and He were listening to the scholar priests who, according to their practice, were teaching there. But unlike the others, He was asking them questions that were astounding in the astuteness and depth of insight they showed.

Mary, as most mothers would be, was upset with Jesus and chastised

Him in verse 48 for all the anxiety He caused. Having expressed His surprise at her anger, He explained what He was doing in verse 49 – His heavenly Father’s business of learning the Scriptures. He then returned to Nazareth with them.

Verse 52 concludes the narrative by revealing the only thing we know about Jesus from the ages of 12 to 30. He **“kept increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man.”** He developed as a person, in other words, in three ways: mentally, bodily, and socially.

But notice something. The verse doesn’t say He developed morally. In terms of virtue, He was the same person at the age of 30 as He was at 12. He didn’t grow in goodness in other words and here’s why. The first half of a popular slogan says, **“Christians aren’t perfect.”** The reference point of **“perfect”** there is goodness. Not one Christian is utterly good. But Jesus was, from the beginning of His earthly life to the end of it. He was always perfectly good, as good as a living being can possibly be, which means He couldn’t grow in goodness.

People Want to Be Good

That is without doubt one of the things that attracts people to Him and here’s why it does. It’s because goodness deeply concerns normal people. Whether they’re small children or the aged, they long not just to *be* but to *be good*. As my grandson Jude routinely says, **“I be good boy,”** which reminds me of Shakespeare’s line from *Hamlet*, **“Methinks thou dost protest too much.”** Jude shows that people long to be good.

Newspaper obituaries reflect what I mean. As an aside, I read one of an avid Browns fan that requested six Cleveland Browns pallbearers and explained why, **“so that the Browns can let him down one last time.”** Anyway listen to excerpts from two other obituaries. Delores Aguilar died in 2008. One paragraph in hers said: **“Delores had no hobbies, made no contribution to society and rarely shared a kind word or deed in her life. I speak for the majority of her family when I say her presence will not be missed by many.”** Then there’s

that of Louis J. Casimir Jr. The first line of his read this way: "**Louis J. Casimir bought the farm Thursday, February 5, 2004 having living more than twice as long as he had expected and probably three or four times as long as he deserved.**" Those obituaries weren't very complementary, but what's instructive is this. I found them in a list called "**The Ten Strangest Obituaries.**" That implies and correctly so that obituaries are normally complementary. In fact, they usually present people in the best possible light. Why? It's because almost everyone recognizes the importance of being a good person - that goodness is a large part of genuine success. Normal people long to be good.

What Is a Good Person

That explains one of the five primary worldview questions that people ask and seek to answer. What is a good person?

Since Jesus was one, we can answer that by examining Him as the gospels present Him to us. We do that by analyzing the narratives about Him in terms of His responses. By responses I mean His actions and reactions. Actions refer to the things we say and do with aforethought, "**in cold blood.**" We say and do things after thinking and deciding. Reactions refer to the things we say and do automatically. Our body parts "**go off on us**" so that we say and do things without thinking and deciding. Those are actions and reactions and we learn what a good person is by analyzing the narratives about Jesus in those terms.

Take our text as an example of what I mean. Notice how Jesus *acted* here. He didn't do anything wrong. He likely didn't know that His parents had left Jerusalem. Or if He did know it, it was probably too late to join them. So, He waited for them in the place where He thought they'd look first - the temple. After they found Him, He immediately obeyed them. He did what they told Him to do. He returned with them, without objection, to Nazareth and there, according to verse 51, "**continued in subjection to them.**" Also notice how He *reacted* here, to Mary's condemnation. He didn't get angry and defend Himself or

condemn her right back – like most preteen boys would. He received it, as unjust as it was, with kindness, good will, and respect instead.

Our text is typical of every single narrative about Jesus in the gospels. Each reflects the same thing. All of His responses (actions and reactions) were characterized by love, peace, and joy. But what about driving the moneychangers from the temple and pronouncing “**woes**” on the Pharisees, Christians ask? His anger there was emptied of all malice, self-interest, and pride. Both were acts of love, done with controlled and righteous indignation, to achieve the greater good – sanctifying God’s house and helping the Pharisees. Even they illustrate this about Him. Unrighteous anger, malice, and contempt were always and completely absent from every response of His. Love, peace, and joy were always and completely present in every response of His. So, He never once got angry and called His hammer “**stupid**” for hitting His thumb.

That enables us to define specifically what a good person is. It’s one whose everyday responses (actions and reactions) are characterized by the presence of love, peace, and joy and the absence of anger, malice, and contempt. No one of course is perfect like Jesus was. I’d use the word “**always**” of Him. The presence and absence of those things *always* characterized His responses. I’d use the word “**habitually**” of people who are like Him. The presence and absence of those things *habitually* characterize their responses. While they will fail here and there, for one reason or another, they can be counted upon to act and react like Jesus. Love, peace, and joy are normal for them. Anger, malice, and contempt are exceptional. They are good persons.

R.B. Holmes was the first baseman and a teammate of mine on the Malone College baseball team. Last year, I read an article about him and the church he pastors, Bethel Missionary Baptist Church in Tallahassee, Florida. It’s a mega church and God has used R.B., or Running Bull as we used to call him, powerfully to make it that.

Let me illustrate what a good person is in terms of my reaction, my initial feeling, when I read the article. There are two possibilities. One

is that I feel jealous of R.B., secretly wishing that he hadn't succeeded as he did. The other is that I feel glad for him, wishing and even praying further success. A good person feels glad, not jealous.

That's the way it goes for good persons. They routinely: are glad when others outshine them, root for their competitors, don't look at attractive people to lust, receive criticism with gratitude and joy, don't desire people's praise, aren't offended by slights, readily forgive wrongdoers, are patient when inanimate objects malfunction, and so on. Love, peace, and joy habitually and pervasively characterize their actions and reactions in the real world of their everyday lives.

How Do We Become a Good Person

Anyone in his or her right mind of course would want to be that kind of person, which explains a second of the five primary worldview questions people ask and try to answer. How does one become a good person?

There is only one way. It's to apprentice ourselves to Jesus. You all know how we do that by now. We make the decision to be with Him in order to become like Him and to do all that He says. We then arrange our everyday affairs around carrying out that decision.

We carry out that decision by practicing activities that engage Jesus and His kingdom at hand. We learn what those are by examining the overall kind of life that He Himself lived. What did He routinely do that empowered Him to be a good person? The gospels tell us. He practiced solitude and silence, fasted, prayed, worshipped, studied, served, and more. He arranged His time and the energies of His mind and body around those activities.

And you know what? To be disciples and friends of His, we must do the same. It's just a fact of life. We cannot be disciples and friends of His and live our lives like almost everyone else lives theirs. We must do what they won't – arrange our time and the energies of our minds and bodies around engaging Him and His kingdom at hand.

I once talked with a Christian attorney who said he didn't have time to engage Jesus. I asked him if he had time to watch television and he said he didn't. But I pursued that further and he eventually admitted that he spent six to eight hours a week watching it, primarily football and golf. So why not devote half of that time to solitude and silence, study, and prayer, I asked. You get the point. We cannot be disciples and friends of Jesus and live as almost everyone else does. We must arrange our affairs around engaging Him and His kingdom at hand.

Jesus is faithful when we do and engages us in return, which brings us into an intimate relationship with Him. As He Himself explained it in John 15:14-15, that relationship of ours grows until eventually we're no longer only His disciples but His friends as well.

And it's that friendship with Him that makes us increasingly good. Leslie Weatherhead published a book in 1930 titled *The Transforming Friendship: A Book about Jesus and Ourselves*. That's a compelling title. It expresses the defining fact of human life. Friendship with Jesus is quietly but powerfully transforming. It creates and sustains the conditions of love, peace, and joy in us. Those conditions in turn then direct our actions and reactions in the real world of our everyday lives.

Conclusion

I came across a website that picked the nine best "good people" who ever lived. Here they are in descending order: (9) Mahatma Gandhi; (8) Martin Luther King; (7) Abraham Lincoln; (6) Mother Teresa; (5) Moses; (4) Jesus Christ; (3) Dalai Lama; (2) Baha'u'llah; and (1) Buddha. That list is laughable. Jesus is, by far, the best good person who ever lived. The others aren't even in his league. In reality, each one is closer to the least good person who ever lived, Adolph Hitler perhaps, than they are to Him. Why? It's because He is what no person is or ever will be - utterly good. So become like Him even if imperfectly. Apprentice yourself to Him and become His familiar friend. You'll eventually make His list of the best "good people" if you do.

Question #1

How practically, in the real world of His everyday life, was Jesus a good person?

To answer this "Jesus Question," we examine His actions and reactions in the gospel narratives about Him. Actions refer to the things He said and did after thinking and deciding to say and do them. Reactions refer to the things He said and did automatically, without thinking and deciding to say and do them.

When we examine the actions and reactions of Jesus, we realize that they were permeated with agape love for God and others. He loved God with His whole being, which then flowed naturally into the human scene. His every encounter with a human being in the gospels was one of selfless and committed agape love.

That love of His played itself out in two ways. First, on the negative side, He never once acted or reacted in a way that harmed a person or subtracted value from his or her life. No person was ever diminished by his or her encounter with Him. Second, on the positive side, He always acted and reacted in a way that that helped a person or added value to his or her life. Every person was enhanced by his or her encounter with Him. We might summarize His every contact with a human being in the gospels this way. On His part, it was one of goodwill and respect directed toward acknowledging, making way for, and assisting the person before Him in suitable ways. There was always the certainty of help and the absence of harm in His presence.

Ironically enough, His pronouncement of "woes" on the Pharisees in Luke 11:37-52 illustrates the nature of His love. Some interpret His words here to reflect a dislike or even hatred of them. But Jesus hated no one and loved everyone, including the Pharisees. His contact with them in this text confirms that. The Pharisees were on the road to hell and were oblivious to it. They were in such a posture of denial, so self-defended, that calm pronouncements would have been ineffective in reaching them with the truth. Jesus knew that the only way He could possibly help them was to speak vigorously and straightforwardly to them and so, that's what He did. His words reflect not ill-will but good will toward them.

This contact of His with the Pharisees and all His contacts recorded in the gospels showed what Jesus did. He abandoned having His own way and fulfilling His own desires as a way of life. He also purposely and automatically spoke and acted to benefit others in ordinary (common) and extraordinary (heroic) ways.