

October 14, 2018 – Amos 5:6-15 & Mark 10:17-22

Are you a good person? Before you answer that, keep in mind that it's a trick question. If you can answer it with a solid, confident, unqualified “yes” or “no,” then you're probably wrong. But if it causes you to think to yourself, “Am I a good person?” Well, then you're probably not far from the truth.

As a society, “goodness” is kind of a moving target. Watch the news and you'll find lots of people who consider themselves “good.” Mom's who neglect their kids who call themselves “good moms.” Children with criminal records who are considered by friends and family alike to be “good kids.” Athletes and celebrities with a known history of violence and drug abuse who like to think of themselves as “good role models.”

If that's your standard, then I think just about everybody in this room is a saint! But I think we know that's an absurdly low bar. Goodness has to require more than that.

But where exactly is the line? When does a person cross the threshold from being a good parent to a bad parent? A good kid to a bad kid? A good role model to a bad role model? And how can we know for sure?

When we look at scripture, we get what seems to be kind of a mixed message. We see that contrast in our lessons today. First, we have a message from the prophet Amos. Now, Amos isn't exactly a well known prophet in the Bible so we might need a little background here.

From everything we can tell, Amos is a relatively wealthy man living in Judah somewhere around 800 B.C. And he is called by God to go north into Israel to the city of Bethel and deliver a message of repentance and warning to their leaders. Because, if they don't listen, God is going to allow the Assyrians to invade their nation and destroy their city.

And so Amos goes. And his message is pretty simple. You are bad people. You are evil. You are wicked. And your wickedness is obvious. Your courts are corrupt. Your laws aren't enforced. Your entire judicial system is based on lies and bribery. And all of this is so that you can trample the poor and steal what little they have without any consequences.

It's a vivid picture of a totally immoral society. And although the punishment that God threatens is severe, His message of repentance is actually fairly easy for them to accomplish. Seek good, not evil. Hate evil, love good. Bring justice to your courts. Show mercy to the poor. Just be good and decent people to those around you, and God won't destroy you. It's that simple.

Well, it seems simple to us. It obviously wasn't to them because... well... they didn't do it. Amos was thrown out of the city. The Assyrians invaded. Israel was destroyed. And, as Amos had prophesied, the city of Bethel was burned to the ground.

But the standard that God lays down I think is one that appeals to us. Tell the truth. Encourage justice. Don't steal. Don't exploit people. Help the poor. If that's God's standard of good, then we don't have too much to worry about. By that standard, we are pretty good people.

And I wonder if that's what the young man who approached Jesus in our Gospel lesson was thinking. “I'm a good guy. I'm honest. I'm just. I didn't steal for my wealth. And I give to the poor. I'm not that much different from Amos and he was a prophet. I should be in good shape.”

But he's still scared. He's obviously been thinking about his future and about his mortality. And he realizes that eternal life is something he can't buy. No matter how much money he has. It has to be earned. And he has no way of knowing whether he's done enough to earn it.

He's right. And like I said, it's a scary thing to realize. And this man is in a panic to hear what Jesus has to say to him. He literally runs to Jesus, falls on his knees, and begs him, “*Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?*”

In response, Jesus asks him what might seem like an unusual question: *“Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.”* The comment seems a little irrelevant, but really Jesus has cut to heart of the matter. Because he's setting up the reason why the Law matters.

“If you want to go to heaven, and God is in heaven, and God is good, then you must be good as well. That is how you earn eternal life. By being good. So prove it. Prove that you are good. Prove that you are good enough for God.”

Now, the young man thinks he's got this one in the bag. “Of course, I'm good! I know all about the Bible. I'm a good guy. I'm just like Amos. I've never done anything wrong.”

And I imagine it's at this point that Jesus' disciples probably braced themselves for what was coming next. Because Jesus' entire ministry has been filled with Pharisees and teachers of the law who claimed the exact same thing. They claimed to follow the Law perfectly. And Jesus' reaction is, invariably, to smack them down for their self-righteousness. To call them vipers and hypocrites and whitewashed tombs full of sin and death.

And yet, Jesus doesn't do that to this man. In fact, Mark says that Jesus hears his response, looks at him, and loves him for it. Why? Because in many ways, this man has gotten it exactly right. He is a good guy. He's good to his neighbor. He's good to his country. He's good to the poor. He's listened to Amos' message and done exactly what he was told to do.

But it's not enough. Because what Jesus said earlier was also true. No one is good except God alone. No one. Not this man. Not me. Not you.

And so although he loves this man – in fact, because he loves this man – Jesus has to tell him something that will crush him. He has to tell him the one thing that the young man absolutely does not want to hear. He has to tell him the one thing that proves that he is not good: “Go sell all you have and give it to the poor.”

You see, as far as God is concerned, you can be good... and then you can be Good. The goodness that Amos is talking about – the goodness of this rich young man – is goodness with our neighbor. It's that basic goodness that obeys God's natural laws.

And it doesn't matter what you believe or who you worship to have that kind of goodness. Because this is goodness in how you interact with your neighbor. Jesus spells it out for us: “Do not murder. Do not commit adultery. Do not steal. Do not give false testimony. Do not defraud. Honor your father and mother.” If we were in confirmation class right now, we would call that the second table of the law. It's all of the commandments that have to do with how you treat your neighbor.

And God cares about that kind of goodness. He wouldn't have written the fourth thru tenth commandments if He didn't. He wouldn't have sent Amos to chastise the people of Bethel if he didn't. He wouldn't have destroyed Israel if He didn't. God wants us to be good to our neighbor. He wants us to be good people.

But you'll notice, Amos doesn't promise the people of Bethel eternal life if they're obedient. He just promises that God won't strike them dead tomorrow. For eternal life, we've got to look at a different standard of good. A higher standard. A divine standard.

A standard that says that the fourth thru tenth commandments aren't good enough. We've got to look at the first commandment as well. “You shall have no other gods.” Not money. Not possessions. Not power. Not reputation. Nothing. You have to give away everything you have. You have to lose your very life. And only then will you have earned treasure in heaven.

It's a higher bar than the rich young man can reach. It's a higher bar than any of us can reach. And it should make all of our faces fall and make all of us very, very sad. Because no matter what we have or what we've done, it's not good. We are not good. No one is good except God alone.

No one is good except God come to earth. No one is good except that our good teacher. Who truly is good in every way. Because he gave up everything he had. Money. Possessions. Power. Reputation. He gave up his very life. So that he could be called good. And so that he could declare that we are good.

We are good, not because of anything we did to inherit eternal life. But because, instead, God looks at his Son and says, "Well done, good and faithful servant." We are good, not because of what we did, but because of who we followed.

That was the young man's real mistake here. Jesus said, "Come, follow me." And he walked away. Jesus says to us, "Come, follow me." And following Jesus isn't easy. It not only means being good in the eyes of our neighbor. But it also means hearing on a regular basis, "No one is good except God alone." It means being told that there is always something we lack and more that we could do. It means coming here and saying that we have sinned in thought, word, and deed.

But it also means following a Lord who's already done so much more than we could ever do for Him. And following a good teacher who is patient and loving, even when we are wicked and cruel. And following a king, who gives us the treasures of heaven even when we haven't earned them. And hearing those blessed words of absolution, "I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit."

The Law of God is heavy and persistent and impossible to bear. But God's grace is sufficient. He has been good to us. He has been good for us. He has given us his goodness. He has called us to follow him through the gates of heaven. He is good in a way that we could never be. Because in his goodness, he has forgiven you. Amen.