

Lectionary 22 B 2021

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

August 29, 2021

Psalm 15; James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Dear Friends:

Can an atheist be a good person? I hear that question frequently. And I sometimes hear an even stronger version of that question. Can an atheist be a *better* person than a Christian? And I sometimes hear variations on that question. Can a Muslim be a good person? Can a Jew be a good person? What about a Hindu, what about a Buddhist? Can someone be a good person despite the god that they worship? Can someone who is a Christian be a bad person? Can someone be a good person if they do not believe in God? These are all very real questions that I hear quite regularly.

The answers to those questions depend on what it is that makes a person good. The word for that is morality. In philosophy, the word is ethics. There are a lot of different ideas about what a good person is, and what a good person does. Usually a requirement for being a good person is that you are not totally selfish. A good person has some regard for other people, and perhaps for the common good, and perhaps for the world in general. Sometimes we speak of a “moral compass.” But if you can describe what a good person is and what a person does, your description will lead you to good people apart from their religion. I am confident that once you figure out your description of a good person, there will indeed be good people who are atheists and good people who are Hindu and good people who are pagans. And there will also be plenty of bad people in all of the religions and non-religions.

The Christian religion has our fair share of good people and bad people. But Christianity, like Judaism, is a people. A people of God. And among this large group of people over three thousand years we have different ideas about what it means to be good, and what it means to be bad. All four of our readings today are about the qualities of a good person. It’s very explicit in our psalm today. The extraordinary 15th psalm. *Lord, who may dwell in your tabernacle? Who may abide upon your holy hill?* Who is worthy to come into the presence of God? Who is good enough for God? That question is posed in verse one. And the next four verses are answers to that question. It’s extraordinary. And it’s about as good of a description of a good person as you’ll find anywhere else.

Our psalm can actually be considered a counterpoint to the biblical book of Leviticus. If the question is, “Who may come into the presence of God?” Leviticus will have a whole list of purity rules. Leviticus famously divides things into clean and unclean, into holy and profane. These purity categories and purity rules are very difficult for modern minds to understand. And it is

tempting and deceptively easy for modern minds to ridicule these ideas. But some version of the purity rules are what Jesus is arguing about in the gospel reading today. And Jesus says that evil intentions come from the human heart. He says that it is not what goes into people that defiles them, but what comes out of people that defile them. Jesus would seem to be siding with our psalm today. Which also mentions the human heart.

The human heart is the star of today's show. Because our second reading today also mentions the human heart. It is from the New Testament letter called James. In that same second reading, James says that some religion is "worthless." James is very concerned with being a good person. Today is in fact the first of five Sundays with readings from James. And if pay attention in church all five Sundays, you'll find yourself agreeing with a lot of what he says.

So just about every religion and philosophy talks about how to be a good person. And the Christian religion, as these scriptures show us this morning, has more than one perspective on what being a good person looks like. But within the Christian religion, within the Christian people, within the great family of saints across time and space, the Lutherans have a perspective. It's actually not just our perspective. But we are the most obnoxious about it. I heard a Lutheran pastor this week comment on our psalm. I mentioned that the psalm begins with a question: *Lord, who may dwell in your tabernacle? Who may abide upon your holy hill?* And this Lutheran pastor said, "No one." No one is fit to be in the presence of God. On the basis of psalm 15. Because no one does everything that psalm 15 says you should do.

The Lutheran perspective is that most of us most of the time know exactly what kind of person we ought to be. And most of the time, we fail. You don't need to take a class to know how to be good. It's very simple. It's as simple as psalm 15. It's as simple as the Ten Commandments. It's as simple as your conscience. It's simple. But it is not easy. And we fail on a regular basis. And instead of being honest about it, we make up stuff. On judgment day, I will stand before the throne of God, and he will say, "Stephen, how do you account for your life?" And I will answer, "Well, I've made a lot of mistakes, but I am not as bad as that guy over there."

Actually, for Lutherans, every day is judgment day. Every *moment* is judgment day. Because at every moment, God is by my side. With every decision. And even when I am choosing between right and wrong, between being a good person or a bad person, I mostly lie to God and tell him that I have my reasons, and besides, I'm not as bad as that guy over there.

This is a very terrible way to live. And it doesn't produce much human goodness. So Lutherans have a response to that. That we found in the first letter of John. Supremely wise words that for a couple of decades you would hear spoken at the beginning of nearly every Lutheran worship service in North America. *If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.* [I John 1:8-9] Those words were written by Christians, for Christians. Those are not words written about or for atheists or Jews or Wiccans or agnostics or Pharisees or aborigines. They are Christian words for Christian believers. A confession of

Christian truth. *If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*

And that is the beginning point. The starting point of everything. Of everything you need to know and do, not only to be a good person, but to step into a much better way of life. It's the starting point. And every moment of your life, and of my life, is that starting point. Jesus himself even said this. He said this about me two thousand years ago. *Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector"... But the tax-collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.* [Luke 18:10-14] Who is worthy of the tabernacle? Not the one who can itemize his moral credentials. But the person who begins with a confession of his need for mercy. "God be merciful to me, a sinner."

We begin there. The Sermon on the Mount, which is the definitive guide to being a good person, starts with these words. *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* That is everything you need to know. That is the entire Lutheran confession in one easy verse. From start to finish. From poor in spirit to the kingdom of heaven. Lutherans are known for talking about grace and faith. But grace and faith are for those who know that they are poor in spirit. For those who begin by saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" We begin by being honest with ourselves and honest with God. And we are always beginning.

Can an atheist be a good person? There are so many things that are wrong with that question. But the principle thing is that it is the wrong question. The right question is, "Can *I* be a good person?" And the answer is, "Yes. You can." Today. Right now. Right this very moment. No matter what you've done, no matter what creed you confess, no matter how old you are, no matter how young you are. You are always at the beginning. And God is always right there. Yes you can. Amen.