A Late Answer to a Friend

Some time ago a friend of mine wrote "It's not what you believe that makes you a good person, it's what you do." I've wanted to answer that statement ever since, but for one reason or another it's taken me until now to get to it.

As far as I can tell, my friend isn't a Christian. I'm fairly certain that may have something to do with her statement. It's only one sentence, but there's a lot implied in it, or at least I infer a lot from it.

The first thing I infer is that she's observed a lot of religious people and noticed that their lives don't seem to measure up to their profession of faith. If this is the case, I am not surprised. There's a lot of that going around. I'll get back to that in a bit.

Another thing I infer is that the goal is to be a "good person." What I don't get out of that is "why." Nor do I find what it means to be a "good person." Both of these are important questions.

Let's look at the second question first. Absent an objective definition of a "good person" we can only look at this in subjective or relative terms. Not to put too fine a point on it, but ultimately we are left with a subjective definition of goodness. If that's the case then what you believe *does* have a lot to do with whether you are a good person or not. For how can

you take good actions without a belief that they are good? I'll come back to this topic in a bit too.

Now I come back to the first question. Why be a good person in the first place? I aim to show that what you believe has a lot to do with this question as well.

One reason to be a good person is to gain the respect of your peers. This is, of course, a rather selfish reason to be "good." It also depends on a subjective definition of goodness. That is, goodness must be defined as that which your peers see as good. Since we cannot know the mind of another, this is therefore a matter of belief.

Another reason for being good is fear of the consequences of not being good. Again this is a selfish reason for goodness. But what consequences might one fear? Are they the consequences of violating society's standard of goodness? Are they the consequences of violating some "higher power's" standard of goodness?

In the latter case it again comes down to what you believe even more than what you do. In the former case you could easily argue that the definition of goodness is fluid, changing with the fashion of the day. Things that our society found abhorrent fifty years ago are celebrated today. So again what we believe matters a great deal when we consider how to be a good person.

Yet another reason to be good is the hope that by doing so you might earn favor with God, and thereby ensure yourself a place in the afterlife. For reasons I'll get to in just a short while, that too is not only selfish, but futile as well.

There are surely many other reasons one might choose "goodness." I don't think it's necessary to go into them all here. I do think that they all depend on what we believe to justify them though. Furthermore I honestly think that there's only one reason for being "good" that isn't ultimately selfish, and that therefore fits *my* definition of goodness, but I'll have to get to that in a bit.

I think that by now it should be clear that it cannot be only what you do that makes you a good person. What you believe *does* make a difference too.

Earlier I mentioned that absent an objective standard of goodness we are left with nothing but our belief or unbelief on which we may ground our concept of goodness. Where then might we find an objective standard? Certainly not in the opinions of mankind. We must appeal to the source of objective truth for an objective definition of goodness. This appeal requires belief in the source of objective truth. Unbelief in objective truth, or in its source implies that their is no objective good. Without objective good what is the point of doing good at all, except for selfish motives as noted earlier.

Belief in objective good requires belief in an obligation to do good. Failure to do good is

then a failure to live up to that obligation, any failure to do good. Even the smallest bad act demonstrates that despite our best intentions *we are not good.* Further if we have an obligation to do good then doing good can gain us nothing beyond what we already have, especially if we have once failed in that obligation.

The point is, what you do is not enough to make you a good person, but it is enough to disqualify you from being one. In fact, if you look at it carefully you will find that no one is objectively good. Since no one is objectively good it should be clear that no amount of good works, which are what is expected of us in the first place, can earn us a place in the afterlife or make up for our failure.

Yet, with faith I said that there can indeed be an unselfish reason for doing good. But this first requires something we cannot acquire for ourselves. Our failure to be good persons must be addressed, and the penalty for it must be paid. Without that none of us can hope to be good, no matter what we believe or do.

This is where the gospel of Christ enters into the picture. Because none of us is good none of us deserves anything less than the penalty for our sin, we cannot save ourselves through our goodness because we haven't any. Yet the God who created us is good, and he provided the **_only_** way for us to escape, through his son. He sent his son into the world, to be born of a woman. He lived a life without sin, *as a man, fulfilling all righteousness.* He then offered up himself to die, to pay the penalty for our sins, nailing the record of them to the cross. He took our sin upon himself and gave us his righteousness. He then took up his life again, the firstborn from the dead that we might live eternally with him. He did this so that those who believe in him should not perish, but should have everlasting life. He did this not for our benefit, but to the glory of his name, because he is goodness.

No, it's not what you believe that makes you good. Neither is it what you do. It's _who_ you believe that makes you good. The Christian is not saved *merely* by belief. The Christian is saved by the grace of God *through* faith. It is God and God alone who makes men good. Our salvation and righteousness are entirely his work, and none of our own, all we are asked to do is to repent and believe God. He will make us new creatures if we but believe and obey the gospel.

The good works that Christians are called to do have nothing to do with saving us. We do not earn our way into heaven by them. Yet for Christians those good works are important, not for any gain to us, but purely to reflect his glory. We do them to glorify the Lord and master who bought us. They are the evidence that demonstrates our faith, both to ourselves and to the lost. They are done not out of obligation, but in freedom and gratitude. This is only reason for doing good that is not ultimately selfish, and is in fact the only way that we even *can* do good.

What we believe matters. What we do matters as well. The glory of God matters most of all.