

N U R T U R E
FAITH
with
Dr. W. Douglas Hood, Jr.

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What Makes People Good?

READ: 1 Thessalonians 5:21 (Common English Bible)

“But examine everything carefully and hang on to what is good.”

MEDITATE:

This year (2017) celebrates the bicentennial birthday of Henry David Thoreau. In a splendid new biography published to mark this occasion, *Henry David Thoreau: A Life*, Laura Dassow Walls, a professor of English literature at the University of Notre Dame, offers an account of one evening, after young Henry had been sent to bed by his mother, was found awake long after, staring out the bedroom window. She asked her son, “Why, Henry dear, why don’t you go to sleep?” “Mother” said he, “I have been looking through the stars to see if I couldn’t see God behind them.”¹ Thoreau reminds us that a journey of faith begins by “looking.” For Christians, we look for God by paying attention to the person of Jesus Christ.

In his first letter to the church in Thessalonica, Paul offers instruction for a journey of faith. Paul’s beginning point is an invitation to “goodness.” Though goodness is difficult to define – and Paul makes no attempt to do so here – it is wonderfully easy to recognize. Often, simple goodness is observable on first contact with another. Paul asks that followers of Jesus “examine everything” and take notice of goodness wherever it may be found. If we believe that goodness is of paramount importance, as does Paul, it is obvious that we should do all we can to learn how it is achieved. That begins, suggests Paul, when one takes notice of everyone and everything that is good and placing ourselves in contact with it wherever it is found. The disciples became “good” men chiefly as a result of their acquaintance with Christ. That is because the soul grows by what it touches.

After bringing ourselves into steady contact with those of good character, Paul instructs the church to, “hang on to what is good.” What Paul speaks of here is the discipline to identify and break down any barrier that hinders the soul from being positively influenced by those of good character. When people fail to respond to goodness it is because they are not sufficiently aware of impediments that block personal transformation or they fail to discipline their own behavior in the manner of good people. Behind any positive change is a period of “practice” and “self-mastery” over a period of time. “Hang on to what is good,” says Paul. Grip it until the moment arrives that it grips you.

Some years ago, on a Celebrity cruise with my wife, I watched in wonder at a demonstration of glassblowing – through Celebrity’s collaboration with The Corning Museum of Glass. Artists, with what seemed to be little effort, created beautiful colored glass pieces, one after another. After dazzling the passengers with their craft, they shared that “mastery” in their craft took 10,000 hours of practice. Each piece of glassware they produced took an incredibly brief period of time to produce. But, what could not be seen was the long, disciplined time of practice and mastery that made that speed possible. We tend to not notice, or we forget, what preceded anything done successfully. In the same manner, goodness is difficult. But Paul shows us the way. Place ourselves in direct contact with what is good and hang onto it until we profit by it.

¹Laura Dassow Walls, *Henry David Thoreau: A Life* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 43.

