

Do We Need God to be Good?

From the series: A Fresh Look at an Ancient Story

Text: Luke 6:36; Romans 12:2

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan
Lent, March 18, 2001

Transcription of the spoken sermon

I have a question this morning that I invite you to consider with me. It is a genuine question, not some rhetorical question, not a question for which I have an answer. It is an honest question about which I invite you to think: Do we need God to be good?

The question came to me a month or so ago. The Lakeshore Ethnic Diversity Alliance sponsored a diversity summit at Hope College involving hundreds of people from this area. It was a very significant event, a day spent looking in the face of racism primarily, but at all forms of exclusionary behavior that hurt and wound and divide. The keynote speaker that morning was Dr. Greg Williams, the author of a book, *Life on the Color Line: The True Story of a White Boy Who Discovered He was Black*, which narrates his life, his experience. It is a most extraordinary story. There were many of you from Christ Community there, and others I am sure, became aware of the event through news stories.

I won't try to give you the whole story of Greg Williams except to say that he grew up in Alexandria, Virginia, in some affluence as a white son in a white family. But the family broke up. The father was an alcoholic, the mother fled because of abuse, and at ten years of age Greg found himself with his younger brother and father on a bus headed for Muncie, Indiana, which was the birth home of his father and his mother. In the midst of the journey, the father told the boys, "In Virginia you were white. In Muncie you will be black." The shock could hardly be taken in.

They came to Muncie where Greg's father, who had passed for white in Virginia, was identified clearly with the black community. Since the father had lost everything, the three made their way to an aunt's place, and here's an address for you: 601 Railroad Street. Being white, Greg was not accepted by the black community, and being black in Muncie, was not accepted in the white community.

Greg told his story with great grace and passion, a most moving story, indeed. He told of the incredible pain of a little white boy discovering he was black and of having his whole world turned upside down. He was exceptionally bright, industrious, and hardworking. Eventually, he and his brother were taken in by a wonderful black lady who had no bloodlines to them at all, but simply provided home, safety and security, as well as encouragement. To make a long story short, and it is a long, tortuous story, Greg Williams graduated from high school, from college, earned a master's, a Ph.D., and graduated from law school. Presently he is the dean of the Law School of Ohio State University.

What a remarkable story! It is one thing to read it in the book, but quite another thing to hear the story from the person who lived it. As I drove from Holland to Spring Lake along the highway that day lost in thought, having been deeply moved, the question of this morning arose in my mind: Do I need God to be good? What went through my mind was the fact that I was so horrified once again with the pain that we inflict on one another. I felt so inwardly devastated by the reality of racism that confronted me with such power and potency that morning. I thought about the question from last Sunday's sermon: What's the matter with us? What's wrong with us?

Then I thought to myself, as a Christian leader, a preacher and a theologian, do I need God in order to call myself and you to be good, to be good in the sense of goodness that contrasts to the ugliness that is so much a part of the human landscape? Do I need to call in God as some external, supernatural being, a lawgiver who holds us accountable, a lawgiver who restrains our behavior, a lawgiver who models another way of being? Do I need God in order to be convinced of that or in order to persuade others? Because what I was thinking, what I was feeling was that I, myself, ought to know enough to be good, that is, to be a moral, decent, civil, human, and humane being.

I know in my depths what goodness is and I know enough to be good without having some external support or some external law code or manual of behavior. I am a self-conscious, free and responsible person. Why do I need God to be good? Why can't I simply be good, because I would be good for goodness' sake? Is it not enough for me to see that, to experience that, to be moved at a deep level? Is that not enough to transform my consciousness and to shape my life? Do I need God to be good?

To be sure, that is how God has been used. That is how the religions, the great religions have imaged God. God is the supernatural, external being communicating laws to the universe.

This is the way it was in Israel, of course. Israel was a nation of people structured by laws which were claimed by scriptures to be God-given. With its moral code, the Ten Commandments, but also with all the civil legislation and ceremonial

law, Israel was a nation of law. They had a manual, a code of divine revelation, and we as a Christian Church took that over.

In the gospel reading this morning Jesus set forth that impossible ethic. Did it strike you as I read it again—that impossible ethic to which Jesus calls us? To love our enemies and finally concluding the paragraph with, “Be compassionate as your father is compassionate.” Over and over again the Israelites heard the word, “Be holy, for I am holy.” Jesus said, “Be compassionate as your father is compassionate.” That is the way that the great religious traditions have communicated the imperative to goodness.

The apostle Paul said in the twelfth chapter of Romans, the great chapter, almost as difficult as the Sermon on the Mount to follow, “Be not conformed to this world but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind that you may prove what is the perfect will of God.” And then in a very particular fashion he calls us to graciousness, to generosity, to humility, to integrity, to love—again an impossible ethic.

That is the way God has been used in the great religious traditions. Negatively put, God is the law-giver and the law enforcer, and if you break the law, there is hell to pay. Positively stated, God is the moral example. God is the exemplar of that which is good. Therefore, follow God.

The religious traditions have arranged a way by which ordinary humankind, obviously unable to live up to such high demands, can find a way of atonement and of reconciliation through priestly mediation, and it seems to me that in our great religious traditions, that is pretty much the way we have come to settle in. We co-exist with the evil, the pain, the anguish, the brokenness, the pain we inflict and the pain inflicted upon us. We co-exist with it almost easily because we recognize our own brokenness. We plead for mercy, and we go on our way in a kind of co-existence with a world replete with hurt and pain and violence, of which racism, or exclusivism of any sort, are simply the outward symptoms.

But do we need that kind of external reinforcement or threat or promise? Might it not be possible for me as a human being, having come to self-consciousness and awareness, being a responsible and relatively free individual, to decide and to determine to be good? For example, what if God “out there” doesn’t exist? What if that traditional religious image of God, that biblical image of God as the supernatural creator/law-giver, doesn’t exist? Would it make any difference in the way we live?

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Nietzsche, in the light of the whole modern development, the development of modern atheism, cried out those famous words: “God is dead, and we have killed him, and now everything is permitted.” Nietzsche saw the collapse of the whole western European moral structure, and went mad. Dostoevsky, in what arguably may be one of the

greatest novels ever written, *The Brothers Karamazov*, has a minor character say, "If God does not exist, there is no virtue. Virtue is useless."

Would you agree with that? Do you need God to guarantee value, virtue? What if that God "out there," that superhuman being, that human being writ large, what if that God doesn't exist? How would it affect your conduct?

Are you good because of God? Do you need that kind of God to be good? In the eighteenth century, Immanuel Kant, who was identified with that great movement of the human spirit, the Enlightenment, was convinced that the human species had come to a hinge point in history, a new level of consciousness: *Auf Klärung*, the German phrase "enlightenment." Kant was convinced of the rationality of the human being. He thought that, being free and responsible, the human being would no longer need that external demand, but could self-consciously and self-critically determine to act morally. Of course, then came the twentieth century, the most bloody and violent century on record. So we can say, "Well, Kant, it isn't true after all that there is a kind of movement of the human race out of adolescence and into maturity, into adulthood." That was his claim, that the adolescence of the human race was over and we were moving into another level.

But what if the thing that Kant saw is a thing that doesn't happen overnight, not even in a century or two? What if we are in the midst of a process, a process which has been underway for fifteen billion years? What if the whole process of nature that has brought us to the present moment, what if that whole cosmic process has issued a moment like this, where individuals like us can sit together, considering such a question? What if that process is reflective of that within the process itself which has moved us to this present point and, as Kant saw, we can come consciously to understand? We know so much about our world through scientific investigation, but have only scratched the surface. Nonetheless, I suppose, we have knowledge, and we come self-consciously to the appreciation of the wonder of life, the marvel of the world.

This morning I looked out as the sun came up. It caught the ice floes on the lake, and they glistened like a thousand swans. Then, as I was driving across Little Pigeon Creek, that same sun caught two swimming swans in all of their white radiance. One catches one's breath at the wonder of it all; even in the frigid March, the pussy willow begins again to bud.

What if, after fifteen billion years, after the torturous process of the evolutionary, biological, historical development of which we are the product, what if we are the meaning of it all? What if we are beginning to see that invitation to be good without external application of law or threat or promise, but goodness for goodness' sake?

“Ah,” you say, “you’re a dreamer.” Yes, I’m a dreamer. There have always been prophets and poets and philosophers and theologians and middling preachers such as myself who have dreamed of another possibility. Certainly Isaiah did in that marvelous sixty-fifth chapter where he talks about the lion and the lamb lying down together and no one hurting or destroying in all God’s holy mountain. And the classic Christian conception of heaven—what is it but the recognition that everything that we know and experience here is only a shadow of what should be, could be, ought to be? Finally, beyond the ambiguities of history in all of its pain and all of its anguish and all of its brokenness and all of its violence, that vision of heaven, that perfect state, that kingdom of God—those are biblical images that emanate from the depths of the human being that knows something other than has ever been.

But what if we’ve come to a point where we no longer looked for that external God to intervene and to bring it to consummation? Certainly that was Isaiah’s hope. That was Jesus’ hope. What if we have come to see that God is not “out there,” ready to snap the finger and shape things up, but rather, God is coming to expression in the human? What if it’s our play? What if it’s our move?

If God “out there” doesn’t exist, then might there be a spirit within us that is beckoning us to be good for goodness’ sake? Then might we see the function of our religious life as the creation, the recognition of meaning, of living with wonder? What if in this Lenten journey we might come to a fresh awareness, a new understanding, a deeper appreciation and an overwhelming sense of gratitude? In that case, we could fall to our knees and say, “O God!” For what is God but that which is trying to come to expression, to create paradise, heaven on earth, community?

Then I wouldn’t need God to be good. God would be good through me. Then the world would be changed and we would live with reverence and awe in the milieu of love and the bonds of community. Then, just then, maybe God would be God.

References:

Gregory H. Williams. *Life on the Color Line: The True Story of a White Boy Who Discovered He Was Black*. Plume/Penguin Books, 1996.