

Comparative Goodness

In the Bible, and in life, there appears to be tension between these teachings:

- There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who searches for God. **All have** turned away and together **become worthless**. There is no one who does good, not even one. (Romans 3 : 10 - 12)
- Kings in the Old Testament were rated as either good king or bad kings.

How do we reconcile this tension? Should we refrain from praising our kids for any actions that appear to be good because none of them will measure up to the holiness and pureness of motives that God would demand?

We are instructed not to judge others. We would expect that someone who grows up in a good, structured family would often turn out better than someone who was abused. Someone who is able to do even some apparently good things while stifling an inner pain from previous abuse that would cause a desire to lash out and hurt others is probably accomplishing more than others who seem to be doing more “good works”.

The desire to compare or rate other people here on earth is beyond our knowledge and abilities and is forbidden by scripture. “Judge not, that you be not judged”. Comparisons are made in the Bible, but it appears that these are mainly for the purpose of determining the most effective way to spread the message of the gospel in a world full of sin. The purpose is not to establish a method of judgment here on earth. Indeed, it is even difficult or impossible to explain the reason some kings or people in the old testament were punished severely and even killed, while some other even more wicked kings or people were allowed to live out their natural lives. This world is not to be the place where God will accomplish his judgment. That will come in the next world.

We should not try to compare our own lives to others either. We should not try to even judge our children. We should try to direct their lives in accordance with the ten commandments and teach them the gospel and remind them of their baptism, allowing the message of the cross to accomplish its work in their lives. If we see some action as an action that seems to further the spread of the gospel, as good and caring actions usually will, or the desire to develop the talents and gifts that God gave them, this can be encouraged, even as God called a few kings good, even we know they weren't perfect. God's intention was that Israel would be the focal point of spreading the message of the Messiah to the world, and a king that moved Israel in that direction was seen as “good”.

Unfortunately, the use of comparative goodness is a very dangerous one and can drive us away from the gospel to trust in our own goodness before God. This problem is probably present in every church in the world, although it is not actually incorporated into the theology and practice of Lutheran churches like it is in almost all the other church denominations. The Catholics, with their teaching about salvation based upon good works, and modern Evangelicals, who teach a “born again” experience or a salvation based upon “a personal relationship with Christ” cannot help but look down upon those who have not had similar experiences. It directly feeds the comparative goodness model

on a level where it is almost impossible not to evaluate another person's standing before God.

Comparative goodness is like dynamite. It can be useful if used very carefully and only when necessary. But, it can be deadly if you are careless with it. Let's let the focus of our church and services always be the gospel. Let our teaching of the law come from the Bible.

On a practical level, if a choice needs to be made between two options or two people, let it be based upon a desire to see the gospel spread the most effectively, and not upon a rating of how we feel the two people will rank on judgment day. This should be done with the knowledge that we may be making the wrong choice in any decision and that we, with our limited knowledge, can easily overlook someone who may be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

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