

“Good” or “Christian”?

What do you want for your kids? A happy life? A nice car, nice house, nice job, nice family? Certainly, you also want them to be good people, living honestly and uprightly, right? Don't worry, I feel the same way. I want my kids to grow up to be good people, too, but I wonder if I'm raising them to become Christians. This question was highlighted by the stirring thoughts of Phil Vischer, the creator of the popular children's franchise *Veggie Tales*, as he reflected on a decade of work:

“I looked back at the previous 10 years and realized I had spent 10 years trying to convince kids to behave Christianly without actually teaching them Christianity. And that was a pretty serious conviction. You can say, ‘Hey kids, be more forgiving because the Bible says so,’ or ‘Hey kids, be more kind because the Bible says so!’ But that isn't Christianity, it's morality...

“And that was such a huge shift for me from the American Christian ideal. We're drinking a cocktail that's a mix of the Protestant work ethic, the American dream, and the gospel. And we've intertwined them so completely that we can't tell them apart anymore. Our gospel has become a gospel of following your dreams and being good so God will make all your dreams come true. It's the Oprah god... It's the American Dream plus Jesus. And it produces good, moral pagans” (**How To Raise A Pagan Kid In A Christian Home**, Barrett Johnson, infoforfamilies.com).

Of course, I am not minimizing the many benefits of Bible-centered children's entertainment. It is not that *Veggie Tales* is a bad thing for our kids or culture. But it does leave us wondering what our own objectives are in teaching our kids. Is the goal to help them be “good” people only? Is it to help them fit in, be happy, have a nice career, and fit the mold of the stereotypical moral American? Or are we trying to teach them how to be Christians - citizens of a heaven-bound spiritual kingdom of *“aliens and strangers”* (1 Peter 2.11) who put Christ's will first in all things? I fear that the gospel is often a secondary force in the lives of Christian families, well behind academic, athletic, career, or romantic goals. We make pragmatic, worldly decisions first and then see where we can fit Christ in.

THE FATHER KNOWS BEST

The First Priority

John once wrote, *“Do not love the world, nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him...”* (1 John 2.15-17). Furthermore, Jesus said, *“He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who finds his life shall lose it, and he who has lost his life for My sake shall find it”* (Matthew 10.37-39). Take a minute to seriously consider what your objectives are for your kids or the young people over which you have some influence in your congregation. What would need to happen for you to deem yourself a successful parent or mentor? If your goals are entirely focused on your kids’ behavior, their happiness, or their accomplishments, but do not include a sincere dependence on Christ and a submission to His will, then it is time to make some major adjustments. After all, the world has enough pagans! The world has enough relatively, comparatively “good” people going through the motions of outward religion while allowing their hearts to be consumed by a job, a house, a degree, or, as Jesus strikingly points out, a family.

“Good” Is Not Necessarily “Saved”

We must keep in mind that “good” and “saved” are not always synonymous. Consider the example of Cornelius in **Acts 10.1-2, 22**. He had plenty going for him: he was successful in his career, had a large family, was a prominent citizen and participant in civic and religious institutions, and had a long list of good deeds to his credit. Everybody spoke highly of him, yet he was not saved. Reflecting on the events of the previous chapter, the apostle Peter clearly states in **Acts 11.13-15** that Cornelius needed to hear *“words by which you would be saved.”* He was not yet saved until Peter explained the gospel to him and he was baptized.

Clearly, without the substance of the gospel there is nobody who is truly “good” by God’s definition. All the good works in the world amount to nothing if a person has not been humbled by the weight of his sin and submitted to Christ. **Ephesians 2.8-10** points out that we are not saved by our works, but by grace. We are, then, *“created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”* Until we are created anew in Christ Jesus, we can never be as “good” as we can be. God defines goodness. That way, nobody can boast (**Romans 4.1-4**).

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All of this is summed up perfectly in **Romans 3.9-27**. After quoting **Psalms 14** and **53** (and other passages), the apostle Paul goes on to explain that every one of us has sinned and fallen short of God's glory. By God's patience and forbearance He passed over sin and graciously offered the blood of His Son, Jesus Christ, so that we could be justified - it is a free gift! Where is boasting in all of this? When do we get to stand up and say how "good" or "moral" we are? The answer, of course, is never. Our own self-derived morality is excluded from consideration. The gospel, therefore, does not take "good" people and make them better, it takes "dead" people and makes them "alive." It does, for us, what we could never, ever do on our own.

Teach Transformation To Your Kids

In a sense, God won't help those who already feel confident in their own goodness (**Matthew 9.10-13**). Rather, He sent His Son to help those who have embraced just how broken they are. In all of this, of course, I am not advocating a kind of Christianity that downplays goodness. When rooted in the One who is truly good, our faith will transform us into Christ-defined good people. This is one of the points of **Romans 12.2**, which reads, *"And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect."* We arrive at goodness through transformation. Goodness is the product, the destination, not the starting point. Perhaps the message to our kids should not be "Be good so that you can prove what kind of Christian you are" but "Be transformed so that God can prove what is truly good through you." Start with God and the desire for goodness will be a natural result. Any life that starts with one's own sense of goodness is doomed to fail - a failure, by the way, that can be avoided if we stop teaching our kids to be merely good instead of Christian!

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