

Homily for the 5th Sunday of Lent

Many times I've been asked over the years (whether explicitly or implicitly): "Isn't it enough that someone is a "good person" for him or her to go to heaven?" Church, the sacraments, the Bible – all of that is extra. "Being good" is what counts. Maybe you've been asked this question before, or even asked it yourself. So, is it? Is it enough just to be good enough?

I've discovered that in peeling back the layers of such a question what is really meant here by "good person" is that someone is not a "bad person" – a bad person being someone who murders or steals, for example. The thing is most people, fortunately, don't murder or steal. But, these are only the 5th and 7th Commandments. What about the other 8? Wouldn't we have to keep them too to be a "good person"? And have you ever broken any of them – cursing, lying, lusting, or the like? Of course we have.

Nevertheless, the "wisdom" of the world maintains that it's good enough just to be "good" – whatever that exactly means. But God's wisdom, as taught by the Church, reveals a whole other standard for what good really is. Today, in our second reading from Philippians, St. Paul writes, "For the sake of Jesus Christ I have accepted the loss of all things and I consider them so much rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having any righteousness of my own based on the law but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God..."

In other words, it's not about us being righteous or good on our own, but rather about accepting the righteousness, or goodness, that Jesus won for us. Remember what I said last week about justice and mercy? Justice is what someone is owed – what someone deserves. And because we cannot keep God's commandments perfectly, our sins have merited our eternal separation from God. But rather than giving us what we deserve – that is, hell, because of our sins – God, in His great love has mercy on us. And in His divine mercy, He gives us more than we deserve, and He saves us from our sins in His Son, Jesus Christ.

It was God-made-man, in the person of Jesus Christ, who alone could keep God's eternal Law perfectly. We try our best to be good, but we fail – we sin. But in Christ, there is forgiveness for our sins. And so, through Christ, His righteousness becomes our righteousness, and His goodness becomes our goodness. And, as we keep trying our best, through God's grace, we slowly grow in the image of His beloved Son, in whose Body we have become adopted sons and daughters – and we are good, truly good.

To understand this a little better, look at the Gospel today with the woman caught in the middle of the act of adultery – arguably not a “good person”. But Jesus uses the example of this woman to teach the scribes and Pharisees – the so-called good people – about how good they are not after all. Just imagine how embarrassed that woman must have been, though – caught with that other person in the very act. Imagine how callous it was on the part of those who brought her before Jesus to do so when and as they did. And what does Jesus say to the “good people” – “Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” And of course they all knew the truth, and one by one, they walked away. Of course they all sinned. And that’s the point – we’ve all sinned – we’re all sinners. We can’t lump ourselves in that “good person” category quite so quickly.

But, what does Jesus say and do after this? He says to the woman that He does not condemn her, but at the same time admonishes her to go and sin no more. Jesus is speaking the truth in charity here. The truth is that she sinned. But, in charity, Jesus does not want to condemn her in justice. Rather, He wants God’s mercy to be upon her through forgiveness.

The same is true with our sins. The truth is, they are sins before God, and sin is an obstacle to growing in our relationship with God, not to mention our salvation. Therefore, do not be fooled by saying I’m a good person as a means of rationalizing your sins. At the same time, God does not want to embarrass us or condemn us when it comes to our sins. He wants to shower us with His mercy and forgive us. And the way He does this is when we repent of our sins – when we humbly and honestly say we are sorry, which we do definitively in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

And, when it comes to Reconciliation, don't be fooled either. Some people say, "God forgives me whenever I talk to Him one on one." So, why, then, do I have to go to Confession – another question I get a lot? Why can't I just confess my sins directly to God? Well, let's ask the question this way: Is the person who confesses his or her sins to a priest any better off than someone who confesses directly to God?

Yes. First, he or she seeks forgiveness the way Jesus intended – just look at John 20 to see what I mean. Second, by confessing to a priest, a person learns a lesson in humility – we all know it's a lot harder, but more meaningful, to have to say something to someone else. Third, a person receives grace through the sacrament that someone who does not go to Confession does not receive. Fourth, a person can also obtain sound counsel or advice on avoiding sin in the future. And lastly, a person is assured that his or her sins are forgiven; he or she does not have to rely on a subjective "feeling".

And so, in the final analysis, while we are truly God's beloved children, we are not as sinless as we might like to imagine we are. And next Tuesday, March 22nd, we will have our annual Lenten penance service here at IHM. Some 10 priests will be available for Confession that evening beginning at 7pm. Please take this opportunity to experience God's mercy, and let the righteousness of Christ be your own righteousness. God bless you.