



TIME OF GRACE®

Skeptical Faith: Am I Naturally Good?

Study Notes

Summary

Dr. D.A. Carson, a prolific Christian author and frequent college campus speaker, has said that the biggest pushback to his presentations is a belief in sin itself. More than ever, people believe they are inherently good and only the environment around them is bad. What people need is therapy and coping mechanisms not repentance and trust in God's salvation. What would Jesus say to this heart-affirming objection? The Bible gives a clear answer, one that drives us back to the gospel for our hope.

- **Genesis 5:1-3:** ¹ When God created mankind, he made them in the likeness of God. ² He created them male and female and blessed them. And he named them "Mankind" when they were created. ³ When Adam had lived 130 years, he had a son in his own likeness, in his own image; and he named him Seth.

- We good? Moses said, "_____, then _____."
- **Romans 8:7:** The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God.

Ephesians 2:3: We were by nature deserving of wrath.

1 Timothy 1:15: Sinners—of whom I am the worst.

- **Romans 5:8:** While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Ephesians 2:4,5: ⁴ But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵ made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions.

1 Timothy 1:15: Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.

- We good? Paul said, "_____, but in Jesus _____."
- **Revelation 21:5:** He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!"
- We good? Jesus said, "Soon, entirely _____!"

Points to Ponder

1. Most contemporary voices believe that the self-esteem movement largely failed. Why do you think constantly telling children how wonderful they are backfired?
2. Read 1 Timothy 1:15-17, which the apostle Paul wrote near the end of his life. How does admitting the depth of your sin actually lead you to a place of hope, joy, and praise?
3. **Evaluate:** The key to lasting self-worth is to focus on what God thinks of you and not what you think of you.

Homework for Next Week

Read Matthew 23:1-15.

Time of Grace Ministry
Skeptical Faith: Am I Naturally Good?
Genesis 5:1-3, Romans 5:8, 8:7, Ephesians 2:3, 5, 1 Timothy 1:15, John 3:6, Matthew 7:11,
Revelation 21:5
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Pastor Mike Novotny

Dr. Carson shared with us what he finds to be the number one most disputed Christian teaching among young Americans. He said it wasn't the resurrection of Jesus; that that miracle happened on Easter morning. And it wasn't the reliability of the Bible; that this is actually a holy book that came from the Holy Spirit. No, in his experience, the hardest thing for young Americans to believe is that they're bad.

How about you? Nobody's perfect; not even kids. But don't we do good things? Like if our hearts aren't good then why do we have all these Hallmark moments from kids, from grownups, from Christians and non-Christians? We love, we give, we share, we have these beautiful moments that the news and social media sometimes captures that warms our hearts. To which the Christian says, "Well, maybe, but how do you know what actions are really good if you can't see the heart?" If a middle school boy says really sweet things to a middle school girl but has ulterior motives, are those sweet things really that sweet? If I give generously to the poor but I want to make sure all of you know it, is my generosity good in the eyes of God? If a local business supports a non-profit cause because supporting a non-profit cause is kind of good for business in the end, is that good in the eyes of the God who's great? Jesus talked all the time about people who looked good on the outside but God didn't think their hearts were so good on the inside so if you can't see the heart, how do you know what's good at all?

"Okay, I'll have to think about that," the skeptic says, "but come on, isn't original sin in and of itself like a toxic idea?" If you tell people they're bad and they're corrupted and their hearts are deceitful and they can't even trust their own feelings, like won't that just lead them down a path where they make bad choices because bad people do bad things? Isn't it better what we've come up with recently with the self-esteem movement to tell kids that they're wonderful and they're unique and they're beautiful and if they're just true to themselves and follow their hearts the world will be a better place? To which someone might respond, "Have you ever studied the self-esteem movement? After 30 plus years of telling people they're so good, when you look around on social media, does it seem like people are behaving better? Author Will Storr studied the self-esteem movement in his book, "Selfie." He's not a Christian but as he analyzed what's happened in culture, this was his conclusion: "For decades, we've been telling people that they're good, which means that people have started to believe that what they feel in their hearts is sacred. Which means that if any of you contradict what I feel in my heart, you're not sacred but sinful; and if you're sinful, you need to be shut up and silenced." And with that one quote, he explained what happens in the comment section of every controversial blog; where someone is offended and their feelings aren't validated and things blow up and apparently telling people that they're so good doesn't make them better; it can actually make them worse.

"Yeah, but," the skeptic says. I mean, this is all pretty convenient for the Christian church, isn't it? Like you can't trust your own heart so guess where you need to come? The church! And you're all bad and sinful and evil. You need to be saved and guess where you can get saved? At the church? Oh, yeah, and while you're at church, guess what we're going to do? Pass the plate and get your money. So isn't this all like an unholy hustle the church invented to keep people chained to its chairs and pews to make money? And the Christian would lament, "You know, that's happened way too often and it's disgusting to God and he hates it." But what if a good church had a different motive for preaching the badness of the human heart? What if they were just trying to keep you humble and happy at the same time to save you from becoming one of those proud people who thinks you're so good and all those other people are so bad? And to keep you as a happy person who doesn't think that you're so bad that you could never be good with God? What if this teaching about the human heart actually leads to a happier and holier place?

You see the debate. Are we good? Boil that idea down to a simple two-word question: We good? And your answer impacts everything. Whether you embrace the common movement that truth is within you, that you should just be true to yourself, that you should follow your heart, or you're skeptical because you believe your heart is deceitful comes down to that question. Whether you trust your gut or open this book and lean not on your own understanding comes down to that question. Whether we have children and have an urgency to connect them to Jesus because they do need to be born again comes down to that question. Whether you can be independently spiritual and just have your own personal relationship with God or if that's dangerous because of your heart and you actually need community and accountability and spiritual authority comes down to that question. So you don't have to answer out loud but I wonder what you think of the question: We good?

Today, I want three people to help us figure out that question; three witnesses who want to step up to the stand and reason with us a little bit before we give our final answer. And those three witnesses are the guy who got the 10 commandments, the guy who wrote half the New Testament, and the guy who claimed that he was God. Today, Moses, the apostle Paul, and Jesus want to help you and me answer that vital question: We good? So if you have a Bible with you or you want to follow along on the screen, let's look at what Moses said in Genesis chapter five. He wrote: "When God created mankind, he made them in the likeness of God. He created them male and female and blessed them and he named them 'mankind' when they were created." And it says here that he made them in his likeness and in his image. That both male and female, Adam and Eve, were like God. And because God is a spirit and he doesn't have a body that didn't mean they were like his height or his hair color; they were like his holiness. They were perfect like God; flawless, spotless, righteous just like God. If Adam and Eve would have looked at their Father in heaven, their Creator and said, "We good?" He would have beamed and said, "Oh, yeah! Just like me."

But one verse later, Moses hints at a tragic change. Look what he goes on to say. Verse three: "When Adam had lived 130 years, he had a son in his own likeness, in his own image, and he named him Seth." Now don't be distracted by the crazy long life and virility that God gave to Adam. I want you to notice those little words: "His own." When Adam had a child and named him Seth, he created him, he made him, he reproduced him in his own image and in his own

likeness. In other words, baby Seth had a lot more in common with his earthly father than with our Father in heaven. And if you've read the whole story, Genesis 1 to 4, you know what that tragically means. That Adam and Eve, who were as good as God, decided to do something bad. They took the fruit from the tree they shouldn't have, the knowledge of good and evil, and they started to know evil in a way they never had before. They sinned and in the process, they became sinners. And they ran from God and they hid from God; they blamed God and they blamed each other. It got really ugly. And apparently, when that sinner and another sinner had sex, they could not create a saint. They created a child in their own likeness, in their own image. Someone who is not sinless, who is not holy, who is not righteous; instead who is broken because of sin. And Adam and Eve's original sin made a sin our human origin. King David would say, "Surely I was sinful from birth; sinful from the time my mother conceived me." After Adam and Eve sinned, it would not be one choice in our teenage or adult years that separated us from God but from the very start the problem would begin because two sinners simply can't create a saint.

So if you're taking notes, write this down: Ask Moses the question, "We good?" And he would say, "Yes! And then no." Yes, we were so good; we were as good as God but because of sin we lost his holiness, his righteousness, his image. It's really important for you to know, especially those of you parents and grandparents, you uncles and aunts. This means because of the fall into sin, what happened to the human heart is not completely reliable. A woman reached out to me this past week who was struggling and I noticed that she used the word "feel" over a dozen times. And connected to how she felt were things that simply weren't true. She felt like God had forgotten about her, that God wasn't with her, that God hadn't forgiven her, and that God didn't have a plan for her. Because what we feel in the depth of our hearts, especially when we suffer, doesn't line up with the thoughts and the plans of God. And this is why connection to this book is so vital. The one thing that doesn't change, the one thing that doesn't ride the roller coaster of our own emotions, which sometimes are true and sometimes are so far from God. The reason we want you to stay connected to the church and to the word at home, to have a Bible app on your phone or tablet, to gather as a family and to read this word is because sometimes what you feel is absolutely true and sometimes, it's not. And sometimes when you're living your truth or following your heart, you're spot on like God would be and sometimes, it's just the opposite because Moses has the hard news. We were good, we didn't need a Bible before; our hearts just knew the will of God. But things changed when human beings fell into sin.

But let's be real for a second: How can you possibly believe that and be a happy person? I mean to think, "My heart's deceitful, my children were born under the wrath and anger of God, let's be happy everyone!" You know, hands in on three. And what are you supposed to do? Like gather with family and friends and our little children in front of the mirror and recite our daily anti-affirmations? "We're not good enough and we're not smart enough and God probably doesn't like us." Like how could you possibly believe that and be able to rejoice in the depth of your heart?

That's the right question actually to ask the apostle Paul because Paul was a man who actually changed his mind about this question. He used to believe he was a good person; a really good person. A better person than most people. But then Paul became a Christian and he thought he was a bad person; a really bad person. In fact, he thought he was the worst person, which seems

like a pretty depressing thing to put on your Instagram, doesn't it? "I used to be good. Now I'm a wretched sinner." And that's what makes Paul so interesting. You know the guy who said all the stuff that we want to put on our Christian coffee cups? That was Paul. The guy who said we can rejoice always. That Christians can have a peace that goes beyond understanding. The guy who said he had learned the secret of being content. If you would have run into Paul, he probably would have had a smile on his face because he was the most satisfied soul you had ever met. Which makes me wonder how is that possible? How can you think you're the worst sinner on planet earth and still have this incredible contentment, peace, and joy? Well today, Paul's going to give us the answer.

Let me show you some little snippets of what Paul wrote about the badness of human nature. He said in Romans 8 that, "The mind governed by the flesh," that's like how we come into the world by nature, "is hostile to God." Like if it was just you and no God, you would push back, you would question, you would doubt, you would not want to do what God wants you to do and if you did, you wouldn't do it with a joyful heart. It's hostile. It gets even worse in Ephesians. Paul says, "We were by nature," not nurture, "deserving of wrath." Does a person deserve to be loved by God, helped by God, blessed by God? Paul would say, "No." You deserve the anger, the punishment, and the wrath of God. And it wasn't just like terrorists and people who hurt children. Look at this: In 1 Timothy 1, Paul talks about sinners and he says, "Of whom I'm the worst." Alright, so Paul did not pull punches when he talked about the human heart.

But something changed all that. Let me show you what else Paul wrote. In the same book, Romans, he said, "But while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Like we were bad but that didn't stop us from being blessed. We were far from God but that didn't stop God from coming near to us. We deserved his wrath and his anger but he gave us what we didn't deserve. Christ died for us. In Ephesians 2, Paul gushed, "But because of his great love for us, God who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions." Like we were dead, we were undeserving of his love, and we were just sitting there like a spiritual corpse and we couldn't change it. So what did God do? Out of his great heart, out of his amazing mercy, out of his unstoppable grace, he made us alive. He sought us, he found us, he got the gospel to us, and he flipped that switch in our heart so that we could be close to God.

Even if you're the worst. In 1 Timothy 1, Paul said this. Here's a trustworthy saying: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I'm the worst." I mean, you can wake up and feel just like Paul; like there's no one who messes stuff up as much as I do but that does not stop Jesus from coming into the world to save people just like us. And Paul was brutal about human nature, which is why he gushed about the loving nature of Jesus. He believed that by himself he was a bad man but because of Jesus, he was insanely blessed. So write this down: Ask Paul our simple question, "We good?" And he'd agree with Moses; he'd say, "No, not by nature. But in Jesus, yes."

Some of you know that a few years ago I did some research in the Bible that changed me spiritually. I read through the entire New Testament and I tried to figure out the names that God calls Christians; like people who trust that Jesus did it all. And some of the names were kind of bad like, you know, you're weak or you're of little faith. And, you know, some of them are kind of good; they talk about being righteous or holy or a child of God. This past week though, I

adapted my research and I wanted to figure out just Paul. Like in his 13 New Testament letters, what did Paul say? Like he said by nature we deserve God's wrath and his anger and his punishment so how did he break down? And I counted up all 13 letters and in total, Paul used 334 different names to describe Christians. Do you know how many of them were bad and how many were good? Bad. Good. Thirty-one times, Paul said, yeah, we are sinners; even as Christians. Three hundred and three times he said but because of Jesus, we are so much more. We are those that the Lord loves; we are a bride beautifully dressed. We are highly favored. We are new people in Jesus. We were invited to the feast; the throne. On and on and on and on, Paul goes and he knows if you're a Christian you need to know this because this stack right here is going to keep you humble and this stack right here is going to keep you happy.

Do you know what happens to people who don't believe that they're bad? They become the worst. In a relationship or at a school or in a church, if I think I'm such a really good person, I'm going to look down on all the people that I think aren't good people. And I'm going to become impatient and intolerant and confused why you all just don't change and become like me. But if you're like Paul and you know that something's wrong with your heart, you can become compassionate and kind and humble and patient. As you raise kids, as you date, and as you do married life, instead of flying off the handle, "Why would you ever do that?" You can say, "I get it. I struggle." And you can be that kind of humble, incredible person that puts others first. Knowing you're a sinner doesn't make you worse; it actually makes your character better. And this makes you crazy happy! Like if you think that God doesn't love you, if you're a Christian, how can you think that? If you think that God has plans to harm you instead of giving you hope and a future, let me give you 303 reasons why Paul won't agree with that. If you think in the midst of your confusion or your pain and suffering that God is not with you, let me give you over 300 reasons why that simply can't be true. How could you not be close to God if he calls you invited, chosen, holy, pure, righteous, redeemed, and loved? Paul's answer to this question, that Christians are not good by nature, but Jesus makes us something new is the key to humble happiness.

Which brings us to Jesus; the Jesus many of you love and trust, what did he say about this question? And the answer is the same as Moses and Paul. Jesus said in John 3, that famous chapter about God loving the world so much, he said, "Flesh gives birth to flesh." Sinful people give birth to sinful people. You're born in sin. Jesus said you have to be born again. In Matthew 7, Jesus was talking about parents and he said, "You parents know how to give good gifts to your children even though you're evil." Look at Matthew 7, Jesus called people evil. And yet, if you count Jesus' names in the gospels, you'd find the same thing. He knew that people were evil but his blood and his love could make them so much more.

But there's one passage from Jesus I need you to hear before you leave today. It's what Jesus said is going to happen to you if you trust in him on the day that he returns. Let me show you these amazing words from Revelation 21: "He who's seated on the throne said, 'I'm making everything new.'" One day when Jesus comes back with all his divine authority, as King of Kings and Lord of Lords, he has promised to make everything new; even you. Your heart will not be torn between badness and goodness ever again. You will never stumble into church and have to have the quiet moment of confession for your regrets and sins. There will just be extra time for praise. You'll never be like magnetically drawn to something that God says isn't good.

You'll never have to apologize for things you do bad. You'll never have to fight that spiritual fight to say no to the things that God doesn't want you to do. Instead, everything that you feel, everything that you say, everything that you think, every motive of your heart, every choice that you make will be as good as God because when Jesus comes back, it's not just our bodies that will be changed but our very hearts and souls. And as Christians, we long for that day. We want our backs to feel better, we want the depression to go away, we want the anxiety to be over. But how good would it feel to never, ever, ever sin again? And when we see Jesus and he makes everything new, that's exactly what will happen.

So call Moses and Paul and Jesus up to the stand and ask them, "We good?" Here's what they would say: Yes, then no, kind of, soon. If you're filling in blanks, I'd put it this way: Jesus said entirely, soon, yes. Your heart will be as good as God intended it. And for all eternity, you who believe in Jesus will look at the beaming face of your Father in heaven and ask, "Am I good? Father, are we good?" And you won't even need him to reply. You'll see the look in his eyes.

About a decade ago, pop star Pink released another hit song that blew up the radio and she sang some pretty interesting lyrics. She said these words: "I can't take the person staring back at me. I'm a hazard to myself. Don't let me get me; I'm my own worst enemy." She was right. The worst enemy isn't some person out there; it's the heart right here. But there's something you know that maybe Pink doesn't; that you don't have to stare at yourself in the mirror all day. Instead, you can stare at Jesus. The one who makes enemies his friends, turns bad people into good, and calls natural born sinners spotless, blameless, saints. We good, Jesus? Stand underneath the cross and you'll know God's answer is always yes.

Let's pray.

Father, thank you so much for your grace. When we see people at work and at school who are not good to us, it can feel almost impossible to love. Just walking away seems like a victory but, Father, you did the opposite. You came toward us. You sought the lambs that had wandered from you. We all like sheep had gone astray but, Jesus, you sought us out and you bled and died so that we can be close to God forever.

Father, I ask for humility today, especially within the Christian church. Our world does not need another proud, hypocritical Christian. They need those who are just like Paul and believe that we really are lost without you. Give us the humility that produces a thousand spiritual blessings, kindness, patience, compassion, and love. And we thank you, Jesus, for your blood. We thank you that because of you we never have to wonder about self-worth. We never have to build up self-esteem or tell ourselves that we're worthy. We're not. But because of what you did now we are worthy of eternal life. Thank you for a guarantee that can't be taken away. Thank you for a foundation that isn't based on our behavior or our spiritual choices. Thank you for unconditional love.

I pray, God, that we could proclaim this boldly. There are people around the world who are not born good. They need to be made good by your blood. And so give us a passion as we reach out to those that we know that don't go to church, that don't read their Bibles, that don't know the truth of unconditional love that's found in you. God, make us holy, make us humble, and make

us happy all by your answer to this question. We pray this with confidence because we know who we are. We may be sinners but we are so much more saints because of Jesus. It's in his name that we pray, Amen.