

Thirsting... For Righteousness

Mark 12:28-34, Luke 10:25-37

Brothers and sisters in Christ, if you are a dog owner then you will get this little joke about a dog asking this existential question. (show meme about “what if I never find out who the good boy is?”)

If you are not a dog owner then let me explain it to you.

For whatever reason dog owners have this compulsive need to scruffle their dogs on the head while asking them, in an affectionate playful voice, the rhetorical question “Who’s the good dog? Are you a good boy?”

Now, we dog owners have never really considered the fact that perhaps our dogs do not catch the subtle indicators that this is a rhetorical question... and the fact that we have left the question unanswered has produced an existential angst in them, which has them contemplating it as THE big question of a dog’s life... *“Who is the good dog?”*

And so this picture has captured the existential angst of one of our canine friends reflecting on this question, considering the terrible prospect of perhaps never finding the answer to this all important question.

But dogs aren’t alone in facing some existential angst over wondering about the state of their goodness... that is also a question that many people ask and wonder about as well – *“Who is a good person? Am I a good person?”*

It kind of strikes at the core of who we are... the question of whether we might be good, or if not good – then what? Bad?? And what determines what makes someone a good person or a bad person?

If our dogs were philosophically inclined, they might be thinking exactly along those same lines when we affectionately ask that rhetorical question to them... like this dog does.

The owner asks “Who’s a good dog?” and the dog thinks...
“Whoa that’s a helluva question there...”

The owner repeats the question again “Who’s a good boy?”
(All of us dog owners seem to have this compulsive need to repeat everything we say when we are talking to our dogs)

And the dog thinks... *“Who among us can truly said to be good? What IS goodness?”*

But – and here’s the whole point - all of that existential questioning becomes irrelevant when his owner says “You are!” and the dog can’t quite believe it... but she repeats “Yes” and the dog thinks “THIS IS AMAZING!”

And friends in this regard I think all of us are like dogs.

When we have someone else who... because of their position of power and influence or moral authority or their credibility of integrity... tell us that we are good people – all of that

existential questioning goes out the window and it satisfies our thirst for righteousness.

Without this kind of person, or people, in our lives friends... this thirst for righteousness – the thirst we have to know that we are good people - will push us to seek out those who can satisfy this need we have.

Now these cartoons about dog philosophy remind me a bit of Matthew 18:18-19 where Jesus had a similar encounter with a certain ruler who - it says *“asked him, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” “Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good-except God alone.”*

And... If you are starting to be able to recognize spiritual thirst in yourself and in others – then you will hear the thirst for goodness, for righteousness, in this ruler’s question.

He is looking for someone who is qualified to pronounce him good – so he approaches Jesus and calls Him *“Good teacher!”*

Now this was not the first time that Jesus has an encounter with someone like this.

We also read Mark 12:28 this morning where a teacher of the law overhears Jesus debating the Sadducees - who were trying to be too clever with Jesus by asking questions about the resurrection to life, which they did not believe in - and we read that this teacher of the law notices that Jesus has stumped them.

So, the enemy of my enemy being my friend and all that, because the teacher of the law was likely a Pharisee and they hated the Sadducees – this teacher of the law decided to jump in and ask a question of Jesus that will have Jesus’ answering him make him look good in front of the Sadducees.

So he asks Jesus *“Of all the commandments which is the most important?”* (Mk 12:28)

Again friends - I hope you are starting to hear spiritual thirst here, that you are starting to be able to read between the

lines as it were and see the need that people have for someone to tell them *“you’re a good dog, you’re a good boy!”*

But why? Why does Jesus have these teachers of the law, rulers and other people of importance and high standing coming to him in order for Him to say they are “good”?

Well brothers and sisters – the clue is in the question posed by the certain ruler, which is echoed in the question asked by the expert in the law from the Luke 10 passage we read, where Jesus is asked *“What must I do to inherit eternal life?”* (Luke 10:25)

You see friends, throughout human history we have always suspected that there is more to life than just this life, that something comes after death - and that what good we do, or how righteous we are in this life is connected to what comes after this life is over.

And God has confirmed this, and also corrects this notion, through scriptures such as Daniel 12:2 *“Multitudes who sleep*

in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt.”

And the scriptures also confirm that what comes next is connected to how we live in this life, Job 34:11 says *“For according to a man's deeds He [God] repays him; according to a man's ways He brings consequences.”*

But, this principle also applied in this life as well... passages like Psalm 92:12-14 indicate that. It says *“The righteous will flourish like a palm tree, they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon; planted in the house of the Lord, they will flourish in the courts of our God. They will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green...”*

And again, in Habakkuk 2:4 it states that God himself, *“the righteous person will live by his faithfulness...”*

So if you are righteous in this life, you will be rewarded in the next – and being righteous also bears blessings for this life. So what does it mean then to be “righteous”?

Well, you may have heard me say on occasion that the bible defines being “righteousness” as being faithful, a faithful covenant partner with God. So a righteous person – a good person – is one who is completely faithful in their covenant relationship with God.

So what does that mean?

Well in the overall story of the bible, by the time Jesus came to earth, to be in a Covenant relationship with God mean that you accepted the grace of God, his gift of blessings, protection, and life... and forgiveness which came to you through His Law – given through Moses.

Obedience to God’s law was the way to show God gratitude for giving us something we did not earn or deserve, and... it was also the means by which you received those blessings and that life.

That’s why King David writes in Psalm 19:7 *“The law of the Lord is perfect, refreshing the soul.”* David is recognizing one

of spiritual thirsts that we can have in this Psalm and he is proclaiming that obedience to God's law can quench that spiritual thirst, and it refreshes your very life.

And if you read Proverbs Chapter 6, you will see that when parents teach their children to obey God's command to not commit adultery that *"this command is a lamp, this teaching is a light, and [that such] correction and instruction are the way to life," (6:23)*

So – these are examples from the scriptures which show there is a connection between being righteous, or faithful, to God in your covenant relationship with him and receiving life.

In the Mosaic administration of God's Covenant your obedience to God's laws - which covered all areas of your life, personal and private, social and public, moral character issues and issues of social justice, the whole nine yards... kept you in faithful relationship to God and that brought you life because God is the source of all Life.

When you are in relationship with the Creator of Life you never truly need to worry if your life is in danger, or if your life will not last, because you are connected to the source of life – through the Law being given to you and you obeying the Law – you have life both in this age and in the age to come.

So – this is why people in Jesus day, especially experts and teachers in the Law – were thirsting to know that they were good... that they were righteous... that someone could or would pronounce them faithful and obedient to God's laws for the various areas of their lives and for their society because this was the basis on which that they would "inherit eternal life."

That they could receive from God a life that was eternal in both quality... and in quantity.

So Jesus answers the Expert in the Law's question by asking his own question, "what is written in the Law? Because that eternal life connection with God comes through the Law.

And the Expert gives a great answer – the same one that Jesus gave when asked about the most important commandment in Mark 12.

The Expert says *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind; and Love your neighbor as yourself”* (Luke 10:27)

And Jesus says *“You have answered correctly – do this and you will live.”*

But that’s not enough for the Expert in the law – He knows this already, and he is not necessarily looking for an answer to the question of “What IS goodness? Who can say they are good?” instead he’s looking for Jesus to affirm his righteousness in keeping the law.

He wants Jesus to say *“You are... you are the good dog, you are the good boy!”* Seriously, he really he is... I’m not making this up - because the scripture text says *“But He wanted to justify himself... so he asked and who is my neighbor?”* (vs 29)

Now – I want to paws here... (haha, sorry – a little dog joke there)

Let’s remember that the point of this sermon series is about reflecting back to remember our own spiritual thirsts, and how the Holy Spirit used them to make us thirsty for Jesus, and how the Holy Spirit brought someone across our path to let us know how Jesus can meet that thirst...

And we are praying that this would make us thirsty for Jesus once more - so that we renew our faith and our trust in Him, we re-ignite our love for Him – and we are able to recognize that same spiritual thirst in others and we can take the opportunity to Bless them by sharing how Jesus satisfied our thirst!

So – can you relate to being thirsty for righteousness? Having that need to know that you are a good person?

Did you seek out other people who could tell you that you were good – in direct or indirect ways?

Were you someone who made sure that you did the right things? Whether that was being a religious person who attended church and was highly involved, prayed, read the bible and fasted?

Or perhaps in the way that is more common today... You make sure that you are tolerant and open minded and not a hater, you're "loving" and you support the social causes that express that loving and consensual ideal, you shop local, buy organic non-gmo foods, drink fair trade coffee and are considering buying a hybrid, and so on...

You all know that I'm no fan of "woke" ideology – but the truth is that being "woke and progressive" today is a manifestation of that deep seated thirst people have to know they are being good people and to have other people affirm that in them.

Brothers and sisters I hope to help you see this morning that sooooo much of who people are these days, what social causes they support or what they do and or get involved in

and how they try to live their lives – is just an expression of that need to be known as "good" – it is their thirst for righteousness.

Do you see what I'm saying here? Can you see that in yourself? Do you recognize it in others around you?

Now here's the twist in how Jesus meets that thirst – and perhaps you might remember it from your own experience.

Jesus doesn't do the "*you're the good dog, you're the good boy!*" bit – he won't say that to us. Instead, Jesus will say "*you may be good... but you're not good enough.*"

As Jesus says in Mark 12:34 "*You are not far from the Kingdom of God*" and in Luke 18:22 He says "*You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.*"

Now this might be difficult to hear Jesus say to us if you are looking for Him to meet that need for righteousness, for

goodness... but brothers and sisters remember what Proverbs 27:6 says *“Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses.”*

Brothers and sisters, Jesus will always help us see, and point out to us, the areas where we are not good, where we are not righteous, where we are unfaithful to God’s law - that’s the whole point of Jesus telling the parable of the Good Samaritan.

This Expert in the Law may have been very obedient in doing what God’s Law required to show that you love **God** with all your heart, soul, strength and mind... but Jesus easily shows him his own prejudice; how he was unfaithful in loving his **neighbor as himself** by telling him a story about someone he hates... a Samaritan.

In the end the Expert in the Law can’t even bring himself to say that name when Jesus asks *“which one was a neighbor to the man who was robbed?”* So – as James 2:10 reminds us

“For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.”

The truth is friends, **no one** is able to be so perfectly obedient to both the letter and spirit of God’s law, to love both God and their neighbor so that their life becomes eternal in both quality and quantity – not even the Pharisees or the Teachers of the Law were capable of this.

This is why Jesus says in Matt 5:20 *“I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.”*

But brothers and sisters, what if there was a righteousness that did surpass that of the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law... and what if that righteousness, that faithfulness, that goodness could be applied to us.

What if it was possible for Jesus to be the good dog, the good boy and somehow we could be connected to Jesus and

therefore we are also then – good... what if that was possible??

What if the reason why Jesus points out where we fall short of God's law when we seek to have Him tell us that we're good people is so that we will ask Him to give us His goodness, His righteousness?

You see... this is how Jesus quenches our spiritual thirst for righteousness – it comes with a twist.

He can't say we are good based on our own efforts to be good – because none of us truly are. Anyone who says Jesus affirms as we are is lying and preaching or teaching a false gospel.

Jesus can't affirm us as good people - but He can give us His goodness instead! He can apply His own faithfulness in place of our own... He can include us in His righteousness and in doing this brothers and sisters He is the living water that satisfies our thirst more than any good deed or virtue signal will ever do.

So who is the good dog? Who's the good boy? It's Jesus Christ – and we are included in him when we recognize and admit our own unrighteousness and unfaithfulness and confess our need for Jesus.

Look at this contrast how Jesus succeeds where we fail.

The Expert in the Law showed no mercy to Samaritans at all, but we know how Jesus held a conversation and received water from a Samaritan woman!

Now he didn't tell her "you're a good person" but he brought out the fact she had had five marriages and was currently living with someone who was not her husband... she wasn't the good dog. But Jesus showed her mercy by offering her Himself as living water, His righteousness for her unrighteousness. (*Not by saying that what Samaritan's did which made Jews detest them so much at them was ok...*)

And the result of that encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well was that she went and told a whole bunch of people

in her town about it. Notice she did not say *“he made me feel so good about myself... he told me I was a good person... and said we are all okay.”* No...

She said *“He told me everything I ever did.”* (vs.39) She communicates the fact that Jesus revealed – gently and not harshly – but revealed none the less, how she needed His righteousness, and she saw that it was true and so received Him as living water to quench her spiritual thirst, and she shared that with the people in her town.

And what of those Samaritans who went to Jesus based on her testimony?? They were also shown mercy by Jesus – John 4:42 has them saying *“We no longer believe just because of what you [the woman] said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world.”*

What did they hear? The same thing – how they needed the righteousness of Jesus instead of their own and they believed it.

But what about us brothers and sisters – what do we hear when Jesus tells us we may be good but we’re not good enough??

Do we hear that Jesus is judgmental and will point our faults and failures, that he doesn’t accept us as we are and therefore doesn’t really love us?

I hope not – because that’s a lie and that’s not what I’ve been saying this morning and that’s not where Jesus is going with that. That is the devil twisting the truth.

Brothers and sisters Jesus truly loves us – that’s the only reason why he seeks us out as we are, with all our faults and failures, and its why He judges our life... so that we can see why we need to trade it in to Him... so we can get His goodness instead, and have His righteousness that leads to our life.

Hear that.

And don't try to convince Jesus that you're making an even trade with Him - you're not.

Own up to where He's showing you that you fall short and admit that it's not good, its not righteous – that's why we are thirsting for righteousness. Then tell Jesus you need His goodness, His righteousness – and by the work of the Holy Spirit... It's yours for free – the Holy Spirit deposits it to your moral bank-account.

Brothers and sisters believe it, trust it, but most of all... act on it – just do it and rekindle your spiritual thirst for Jesus... because He IS THE good dog. Give your unrighteous life to Jesus and receive His righteous life in its place to quench that spiritual thirst for righteousness

Amen – let's pray.