

## continuous conversion

### BEING GOOD

I remember a conversation between my mother and my Aunt Johnnee. They were talking about my cousin Michael, who wasn't present at the time, and my aunt remarked, "Michael is just good." My mother agreed.



by Sara Tusek

I've thought about this remark since then, wondering exactly what my aunt and mother agreed on as being good. I can enumerate some of the qualities of goodness that Michael exhibited. My cousin was a modest, pleasant, reticent person. He and I were about the same age, but I didn't spend much time with him as a kid because he lived on a farm and I lived in the city. When I visited the farm, Michael was always helping his father with the cows and the tobacco. He was not contentious, opinionated, or divisive in his relationships. He was kind and respectful to his parents.

So here's the list I compiled of qualities of goodness:

- *Modest*
- *Quiet*
- *Respectful*
- *Polite*
- *Helpful*
- *Not argumentative*
- *Easy to be with*

### GOODNESS: BORN OR MADE?

I do believe that the qualities listed here are associated with goodness. One question might be, then, how are these qualities devel-

oped in a person? Are you simply born good, like a person in a fairy tale who's blessed before birth with the gifts of goodness? Will a person blessed with goodness be good, just by nature? Could such a good person be anything but good?

Somehow as a child I formed the opinion that goodness is innate. You're either good or not so good. It was many years before I realized that, while some people might be indeed blessed, and some might be temperamentally inclined, toward the qualities of goodness, you can become good by choice. This revelation was helpful to me, as no one had ever told me I was good in so many words and I was afraid that the goodness "fairy" had passed me by. In fact, I was far more conscious of my failings and faults as a person than of any goodness I might possess.

So the idea of goodness became something attainable, something I might strive for in my life. Goodness was a decision of will, and I would be good. That was my childhood conclusion about goodness.

### TRYING TO BE GOOD

I tried to be good, as the old Christmas song says scoldingly, "So be good for goodness' sake!" I tried to be modest, quiet, respectful and so forth. I avoided controversy and kept my mouth shut most of the time, if possible. This was not always easy, as I have strong opinions about nearly everything and enjoy articulating what I believe, but I managed to tone myself down enough to pass as a good person (I hoped).

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## **TRYING TO BE GOOD (CONT.)**

This effort at goodness did not pay off, though. I didn't feel that I was good, as I knew that my inner thoughts were often not the least bit good. I still did things that didn't fit with this definition of goodness. And no one around me suddenly said, "Oh, what a good person you are!" Neither from the inside or the outside did my goodness regime produce any results.

## **WHY BOTHER?**

By the time I was a teenager, I began to wonder why I was even trying to be good. Not only was I not reaping the benefits of goodness (inner peace, a good reputation) but I wasn't having much fun. So I decided to stop being good, and start being "myself." As so many kids do, when I went to college, away from my old public self, I tried on some new personas. None of them was "good." I tried artistic, politically-involved, and a few others. I finally had some fun, but none of those roles fit me well.

I was at an impasse—trying to be good didn't make me fulfilled, but neither did NOT trying to be good. I was stuck somewhere, unsure of who I was, who I wanted to be or how to be myself ("live authentically," as people would say today). I became increasingly aimless and wondered if I'd ever get a handle on how to be myself. I was 24 years old and already disillusioned with my life.

## **A FRESH PERSPECTIVE**

And this is where God came in! I started going to a weekday prayer meeting with a friend. I hadn't been to church in 10 years, but the people at the meeting were so friendly and seemed so happy that I was fascinated. It became apparent that these Christians were drawing on a source of power and joy that I didn't know about. Seemingly, they weren't constantly trying to be good

by their own will, but they were good! What did they have? I was curious and kept going to the meetings.

## **GOD'S GOODNESS**

And finally I understood where these people found their goodness—in God. This seems like a "no-brainer," in a way, as I had been taken to church when I was a kid and knew about God. But I found that knowing about God is one thing, while trusting His goodness in dealing with every part of your life is something completely different. The happy Christians at the prayer meeting had surrendered their entire lives to God and now radiated His goodness.

I realized that I'd been confusing the outcomes of goodness with goodness itself. Modesty, helpfulness, and so on are not goodness—they are the fruits of inner goodness. And how can a person gain inner goodness? Through allowing God's own goodness to flow into and through his or her life.

Trying to be good on your own is a worthy goal, but very difficult, if not impossible. The fact that the word "good" is related to the word "God" indicated that the definition of goodness is intricately intertwined with God. I'm not saying that only professed believers in God can be good, but I am saying that all goodness comes, ultimately, from God. He is the standard of goodness and the source of goodness. So when my aunt and mother called Michael "good," they were saying that God's goodness was made manifest in Michael.

I still don't see myself as a particularly good person, but I pray that God's goodness flows through me into the lives of the people I meet. I pray that these people can be inspired by the goodness of God, and be intrigued by this goodness, just as I was. The goodness of God is inexhaustible because He is goodness itself, and His goodness can and will transform our lives.

