

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

What or who do we imagine God to be? The problem with a question of this nature is that in order to answer it, God becomes contained to our purview based on our understanding. Nonetheless, we all have an idea or an opinion about God...don't we? But, do we worship and praise the god of our purview and expectations or do we worship and praise the God who sees us for the sinner we truly are? We seem to draw conclusions about God based on the context of our perceptions, our sensitivities and our judgments. Based on that, we then have the audacity to assume what we do as Christians is what any "good" Christian would do or should do. Based in *our* perceptions of God, we assume the attributes of a "good" Christian.

Looking at the history of Christian theology and the church today, Saint Paul is the first and the greatest Christian theologian who significantly shaped Christian theology and the church as we know it today.¹ His significance extends far beyond his missionary journeys and letters. He was not just a preacher or an apostle, he was also a theologian, cultural bridge-builder, and one of the most influential figures in the history of Christianity. We would not be the church we are today if not for St. Paul's efforts that laid the foundation for early Christian communities and shaped Christian doctrine. One of the things I admired most about Paul is how his past drove his tireless advocacy for inclusivity and enabled him to see past cultural barriers that enabled him to share the Good News of Jesus Christ to both Jews and Gentiles. Through his missionary journeys, theological writings, and his history, Saint Paul played a pivotal role in spreading Christianity across the Roman Empire, influencing both Western and Eastern cultures.²

I think after understanding his work for the Lord one could quickly and without hesitation assume that St. Paul was a "good" Christian. However, Paul would not see himself that way! And if we look at Paul's past, or rather Saul the Pharisee's past, we would not see him as a "good" Christian. One might even say he was not a very good man either.

Today in our Epistle reading to the church in Rome, we hear St. Paul's very own confession of why he would not consider himself a "good" Christian. Paul is deeply devout, but in his devotion, he understands his human nature and his need for the grace of Jesus Christ and just who Jesus Christ reveals to us all. Listen again to the words of St. Paul writing to the church in Rome:

¹⁵ I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ¹⁸ For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. ¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. ²⁴ Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? (Romans 7:15, 18-19, 24)

Paul knew the answer to that question and Luther learned that answer from Paul. Luther understood this sentiment when he wrote that it is a comfort to hear that such a great apostle (like Paul) was involved in the same sorrows and afflictions as we are when we try to be obedient to God. Who will rescue me, who will rescue any of us? ...will it be the god of our expectations who we assume looks unknowingly past all our ill intent and our words that say we have no sin...

¹ Dunn, James D. G., *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998, Chapter 1, Prologue, Prolegomena to a theology of Paul, page 2.

² Comments about St. Paul supported by Dunn's prologue and this web site: <https://footstepsofsaintpaul.com/historical-and-cultural-significance-of-saint-paul>

will it be a god that only sees what *we* want God to see? Or will we be rescued by the God who has given His own Son to suffer and die a horrible death for the wretched person that we are?

St. John addresses the darkness we blindly find ourselves in when we assume a self-righteousness and he does so with these very familiar words that we use to confess our own faults:

⁶ If we say that we have fellowship with [God] while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; ⁷ but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. ⁸ If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, [God] who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰ If we say that we have not sinned, we make [God] a liar, and his word is not in us. (1 John 1:6-10)

Today in this reading from Paul's letter to Rome, we hear that our faith begins by breaking down our self-righteousness. Paul shows us today in this passage that one who is truly a "Christian" cannot be a "good" Christian. To be "good" is expressing approval or a judgment of what is "good." In this title of a "good" Christian, whose approval or whose judgment is expressed? Is it our approval? Is it approved by "our" assumptions about God that sees us as a better or the best Christian?

The term "good" also means morally excellent, virtuous, righteous, pious, making this notion "good Christian" an oxymoron. Good and Christian are opposing terms because to be a true Christian is to recognize that we all fall short of being morally excellent, virtuous, and righteous. And that we don't earn these things, we aspire to embody them, but nonetheless, in our efforts we all fall at the foot of the cross and from there Jesus takes us. Within our Gospel today Jesus asks:

To what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, ¹⁷ 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.' (Matt 11:16-17)

This chapter of Matthew's Gospel addresses what the words and actions of Jesus indicate about his identity. This chapter also tells of how different people respond to Jesus. Some people believe him to be the Messiah, some the Son of God, some see him as a prophet, and some just simply reject him and his message. The Pharisees accuse him of wielding the power of Satan. And we simply disregard him in our assumed self-righteousness.

And from the opening of our Gospel lesson Jesus is addressing the disciples of John the Baptist who it seems just don't get it and are sent to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" At the opening of this chapter in Matthew, Jesus is inviting John the Baptist and his disciples to figure out on their own who they perceive Jesus to be based on the activities of Jesus and what they hear about them. But here is where our perception is turned, not just in this chapter or this Gospel, but throughout the Bible, we take these words about who God is and who God is through Jesus Christ and make them about ourselves in our attempt at defining what a "good Christian" is. Some will even say that the Bible is the road map for becoming that "good" Christian, when it is actually showing us what God has already done for us.

But Jesus reminds us and show his disciples that:

^{21b} ... that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. ²² And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.' ²³ But he turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.' ²⁴ Then Jesus told his disciples, 'If any want to become my followers, *let them deny themselves* and take up their cross and follow me. (Matt 16:21-24)

Let them deny themselves... let them deny their self-righteousness and follow. Here is the part of being a Christian that we don't like, that our faith will cause suffering. The call to just simply live out our faith is connected to the humility and the suffering of Jesus. But you see the Good News of Jesus Christ and God's promise in Jesus Christ is connected to his suffering. And we hear in this exchange with Jesus and Peter that any attempt to hinder this suffering is satanic. In this exchange we see that from the start we have taken offense at the suffering of Christ. Deep down, we don't want that kind of suffering Lord because we don't want it for ourselves, and we don't want it as Christ's church. We don't want to be forced to accept the law of suffering from our Lord.³ We would rather use our faith to elevate ourselves from any suffering or shortcoming in order to step on others so we can claim our goodness as Christians.

Our call, as Baptized children of God, is to understand that we are not God nor are we Jesus Christ. This is laid on each and every Christian, in that the first Christ-suffering that everyone has to experience is the call which summons us away from our attachments to this world, and that includes putting to death or doing away with our assumptions about who or what God is and who we think we are as Christians through our assumptions. Our call to being Christian, period, is not about how "good" or how righteous we can assume ourselves to be. Rather our call is the death of the old self assumed "good" Christian as we encounter the mercy and grace of Jesus Christ.⁴

Jesus is the promise of blessing given because of our brokenness and not our assumed earned wages.⁵ Our wisdom and our intelligence are in Christ...period and that is all we need to know about God. Luther explains it this way:

"What, then, is the knowledge of God which is taught by Christ? Is everything taken away from us and nothing left to us? Where, then, is wisdom? Where is righteousness? Where is virtue? Not in us but in Christ. It is outside of us, in God. Thus we have been made babes, fools, sinners, liars, weaklings, and nothing since everything was given over to Christ. No one knows the Father except the Son and no one knows the Son except the Father, because everything belongs to the Father alone and has been given only to the Son. Thus we have been utterly emptied of all knowledge and thus made so altogether childlike and fit that the Father reveals to us what is His own and likewise the Son reveals to us what is his own..."⁶

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 4, *Discipleship*. Translated from the German Edition, Edited by Martin Kuske† and Ilse Tödt. Minneapolis: Fortress Press paperback edition: 2003. This paragraph's wording is undergirded by Chapter Four, *Discipleship and the Cross*, pages 84-85 par 77-78.

⁴ Ibid page 87. Again, not a direct quote, but the thoughts of this notion are undergirded in the works of Bonhoeffer.

⁵ Skinner, Matthew L., *Matthew, The Gospel of Promised Blessing*, Abington Press: Nashville, 2024, Chapter 4, Participating as Disciples, page 62. Matthew L. Skinner is an Asher O. and Carrie Nasby Professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary in Saint Paul Minnesota.

⁶ *Luther's Works Volume 51, Sermons*. Edited and Translated by, Helmut W. Doberstein, General Editor, Helmut T. Lehmann. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959. "Sermon on St. Mathias Day, Matt, 11:25-30, February 24, 1517" page 28.

I asked at the start of this sermon who or what do we imagine God to be? I believe the Good News of who God is, is found in the closing words of our Gospel lesson. God is the One who in the suffering of Jesus Christ has taken our burdens of sin and death from us. In Jesus Christ, God has taken the burdens of the religious obligations we place on ourselves. Like Paul, we know and love the law but we succumb to its power by thinking we can work out our own salvation by being a self-established-good-Christian as if Jesus had not achieved it for us. But in our self-absorbed actions may we turn our hearts and our eyes from ourselves to see the works of the Good News in that there is only one true “GOOD” Christian...Jesus Christ. And he is good because through his life, his death, and his resurrection He does what we cannot do, he makes us all good Christians by freeing us from sin and death and that makes us all who we truly are...forgiven children of God.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.