



LOOKING AT LIFE

# Is Being Good ... Good Enough?





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**DAVID WAS SURE HE WAS A GOOD PERSON.** A filial son who was close to his parents and siblings, he was also well-liked among his colleagues and friends. Some of them even jokingly called him “Saint David”, because he never lost his temper and never grumbled, no matter what happened to him.

But David often wondered if this was really true. He was aware he had some flaws. He got impatient easily, and often felt flashes of intense anger with those who frustrated him. As a naturally quiet person, however, he usually kept his feelings to himself. “So,” he wondered, “am I really a good person?”

Most of us desire to be good; it seems to be a natural, instinctive thing. Why? Perhaps it springs from an innate desire to bring peace, to be kind to others, and to help make the world a better place.

We may have been brought up to believe that being good is the “right” thing to do. We may also have been taught that we will be rewarded with happiness and prosperity for being good, and possibly even enjoy a better afterlife.

But who is a “good” person? What does it really mean to be “good”? Let’s think about some of the definitions of this word. To some, a good person is one who does what is “right” according to his conscience. He has a sense of propriety, does good deeds, and respects his elders. To others, a good person is one who obeys the rule of law and neither steals nor kills, and lives in a way that earns people’s respect and approval.

In these definitions, we can see two general approaches to being good: living by our conscience, and obeying the rules and ethics of society. Let’s take a closer look at them.

## Conscience and Laws: How Good Are They?

**OUR CONSCIENCE**, or our internal sense of what is right and wrong, is usually our main moral “compass” in life. It helps us discern between right and wrong, and directs us to do the right thing. Have you wondered, however, where our

conscience comes from? From what does it take its bearings? Is it something we were born with, or can it be influenced by our upbringing, by tradition and culture, or by current social values? Is that why, while most of us can agree on general moral standards, each of us has a different conscience?

As a boy, I was once attacked by hooligans in a carpark. They grabbed my money, punched me, and threw me to the ground. Before they left, however, one of them threw a couple of coins at me, saying, “This is for your ride home. We have a conscience, all right?”

Lying on the ground, I found it hard to agree with him.

I also read the story of a drug dealer who, when arrested, said he was a man of conscience. While he did not deny selling drugs, he argued that he neither stole nor killed, and was therefore “not a bad man”.

While most of us would say that the hooligans and the drug dealer failed to obey a larger moral code, they genuinely believed they were “good” as far as their consciences were concerned. What is “good” to each of us is clearly relative. Because our consciences are imperfect, our definition of “good” is too. This is

why most societies and countries need laws and rules.

Whether they are officially enforced by the authorities or observed by a community, laws and rules help to bring about order by ensuring that we can live together peacefully even when we have different ways of life and moral codes.

Many laws are common around the world. For example, it is a crime to cheat, steal, or kill in most, if not all, countries. But some are shaped by consensus. In my country, for instance, some people have been punished for wearing skimpy clothing in public places; while this might be acceptable in other countries, it is frowned upon in mine, as we are a more traditional society.

Ultimately, whether informed by conscience or consensus, most laws and rules are based on human beliefs. Like our own consciences, they differ according to our culture, or even change over time. Again, this means that what is “good” according to the law is not absolute. And if the things that we use to define a “good” person are subjective and imperfect, what would this mean for our efforts to be “good”?



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## When “Good” is Relative

**LET’S THINK ABOUT** what might happen when we have a subjective, imperfect definition of what is good. Consider these possible results:

**One, we choose our own rules.**

When society cannot agree on what is right and wrong, individuals will rely on their own sense of morality. Given our imperfect consciences, however, this approach is less than ideal. The hooligans who robbed me probably felt they were being kind by leaving me some money to get home. When each of us has our own standards, it is hard to tell who is truly a good person.

**Two, we put ourselves first.** Without an objective point of reference in life, we are likely to give priority to our own desires and needs, or those of our loved ones, and to justify moral codes that allow us to continue pursuing these goals. The drug dealer I read about probably justified selling drugs as a way of making money.

**Three, we make allowances for ourselves.** With moral standards that are not absolute, it can be tempting to bend our own rules or lower our standards. We start to excuse “smaller” mistakes, blame them on “character



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flaws”, or make exceptions due to “circumstances”.

You can imagine what might happen when we make up our own rules or bend them at will. Not only will we find it impossible to be truly good all the time, but we will also find it hard to live with others in harmony. How will this affect life? Imagine building a house based only on personal preferences, and not on a blueprint designed to proper engineering and architectural standards. We could put our best into the project and declare that the structure is sound—but it would be unsafe to live in. It wouldn’t matter how diligent or passionate we are; our lack of construction know-how would still result in failure.

The heart of the problem, it would seem, is us! While we genuinely want and try to be good, we are let down by an imperfect conscience and a fallible, selfish human nature that easily succumbs to temptation. Even our standards of goodness are imperfect, because they are defined by us. Perhaps that’s why many people, like David, can’t help but wonder if they are really good people. Instinctively, we know we can be better.



*Who might be more qualified to  
determine what is good?*

But what can we do? If our consciences and laws are not reliable, and our efforts to be good are far from perfect, how can we be truly good?

## A Perfect Example of “Goodness”

**UP TO THIS POINT**, we have been examining what it means to be a “good” person from the human perspective. Perhaps we can think about the issue differently, and ask: Who might be more qualified to determine what is good?

Think about the rulers that we use to measure the length of things. Rulers are physical “standards” which we rely on to determine how long, say, a table is. Yet we know that rulers too are not always reliable. One ruler might tell us that the table is 1 metre long, while another might say it’s 1.05 metres. How would we know which one is accurate? How would we even know how long “1 metre” really is? For many years, the answer lay in France’s national archives in Paris, where the length of a specially-produced metal bar was universally taken to be the ultimate standard for 1 metre. This bar was the “master ruler”, by which all rulers were calibrated.

Is there an equivalent standard

for “good”? Is there a person who is perfectly good and therefore able to properly judge what is good?

The Bible, on which the Christian faith is based, tells us that there is such a person—the Creator God. According to the Bible, this God, who created all things, is not only good, but is also unchanging and absolute. He is therefore the ultimate and perfect standard of good.

The Bible also says that because God wants us to reflect his own perfect character, he created us with consciences to help us discern between right and wrong. That’s why we have an innate sense of what is good, even though we don’t always get it right.

But, you may ask, how does knowing God’s absolute standard of good help us? How can we be truly good when our own moral “rulers” are unreliable, and we are imperfect to begin with?

## Being “Good”

**MOST PARENTS WANT THEIR CHILDREN** to be good. They will set high standards for their kids, teach them how to reach these standards, and help them when they fail—because they love them.

In the same way God, who loves us as

a heavenly father, deeply desires us to be good. But he knows we are imperfect and will never succeed on our own. So he helps us in a special way. The Bible explains that he sent his own son, Jesus Christ, into this world as a human being. He experienced our suffering and hardships, but lived a perfect life as the ultimate “good” person—he lived in the way that was pleasing to God, and obeyed God in everything he did. Jesus loves us and wants us to be perfectly good and acceptable to God. So he died on our behalf, taking upon himself the punishment for all the wrongs that we have done, as well as our flawed nature. As a result, whoever believes in Jesus and accepts what he has done for us can be forgiven. And if we believe in Jesus, we are given the strength to overcome our imperfect human nature and follow God’s perfect standard of goodness. Jesus then rose from the dead, showing that God accepted his sacrifice. The Bible says:

*Christ suffered for our sins once for all time. He never sinned, but he died for sinners to bring you safely home to God. He suffered physical death, but he was raised to life . . .*

—1 Peter 3:18



*Jesus loves us and wants us  
to be perfectly good and  
acceptable to God.*

I know this truth can be hard to understand or accept, but I hope you can give this matter some more thought. Only God, the “master ruler”, can restore us, the imperfect rulers, and make us truly good. If you’ve ever wondered whether you are truly good, or felt you have not been as good as you wanted to be, don’t be discouraged or disheartened. God loves you and he has made it possible for you and me to be truly good.

Talk to a Christian friend and find out more about Jesus. We also have *A Story of Hope*, a booklet that can tell you a bit more about Jesus, available without charge by completing and returning the attached request form. You can also check us out online at **odb.org** and view the many other printed and digital resources we have available.



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