

The Good Woman Who Didn't Go to Heaven

Once there was a woman who was raised by good parents. She grew up and regularly did good deeds just like her parents and teachers taught her, and she rejoiced in the good she did. Most everyone who met her liked her. When she died, she went straight to Hell.

After many centuries of wailing and screaming in agony, she finally caught the attention of an angel passing by. She cried out, "Why am I being punished, since all I did was good all my life?"

The angel replied, "The good you did, you did naturally. It was really done because you were mimicking what your parents and teachers taught you. Had your parents been jewel thieves, you also would have been one, and you would have rejoiced in how well you stole jewels. Indeed, many of the conventionally good are not good. The truly good person is always *learning* how to do *more* good."

The woman thought for a moment. "Why didn't my religious teachers tell me this?"

The angel replied, "Your teachers are elsewhere in Hell."

"But then why am I being punished when no one taught me how to behave?"

"In your life, you were satisfied with some things but not with others. For instance, you weren't satisfied with your income, so you got a better job. You weren't satisfied with your appearance, so you learned how to dress attractively and apply makeup in order to get more attention and approval from others. You weren't satisfied with your education, so you went back and got an extra degree. But in a world where many innocent people kept suffering and dying, you *were* satisfied with the level of goodness that you were taught. You wanted to learn about many things, but not about how to do more good. That is why you are in Hell."

The woman spoke earnestly, "How I wish that someone would go and tell this to all of the people in the world like me!"

The angel smiled. "Because you have wished with all your heart, news of your fate and how to avoid it will reach Earth in the form of a story. Many will read it and understand that they are not really good people, even though they do good. Some of these will become good people by learning to do more good and by re-forming themselves. Not only will they reach Heaven, but they will make the Earth more Heaven-like. Others will

dismiss this story, believing it to be a mere fable. Because they will deny the teaching about goodness as learning to do more good, their suffering will be greater than yours.”

The woman had meanwhile realized that her wish to help the people back on Earth was the first time she did something good that hadn't been taught to her by someone else. After all, some of the people who listened to the message of the story would go to Heaven. “What about me?” she asked hopefully.

The angel spoke. “My child, there is such a thing as too late.”

Commentary

The first person who read this story really disliked it. I can certainly understand why. The story offers quite a shock. According to the story, you can do good all your life, and still not be a good person. The story ends even more brutally. The woman at last does something profoundly good, but it is too late.

For a while, I wanted to leave off that brutal ending. While I enjoyed the unexpected final twist, it wasn't what I wanted to emphasize in the story. To me, learning how to do *more* good was paramount. But after a few months it occurred to me that the second part also fit with my purpose.

Yet, I had two reservations about including the story here. First, some people might mistakenly think that I was trying to drop hints about the afterlife. This would be teaching religion, and I'm not qualified to teach religion. Second, any ethics professor will tell you that there's something wrong with defining the good person as “someone who wants to learn to do more good.” The problem is that I haven't really explained what goodness *is*. In philosophy this is called a tautology—defining something in terms of itself. It's like saying, “To be a strong person you need to increase your strength.”—I really haven't told you *how* to increase your strength, nor have I explained what strength *is*.

Anyway, just as I'm not qualified to teach religion, neither am I qualified to teach ethics. In fact, taken to extreme, you could say that anyone who kept wanting to learn how to do more good, might be *obsessed* with goodness. And if they felt that they were not okay until they were a good person, they would never feel okay or comfortable with themselves, because there's always more to learn and more to do.

But I really think the story is appropriate for several reasons.

First, as I mentioned, there are many decent people who are committed to their style and level of goodness. They don't want to learn any better ways to do good. These people will want to ignore my work. The problem is that, taken together, all the good that all these decent people do is not enough. It's not an adequate response. It's easy to prove this: a billion people are currently suffering and ten million children die each year. Case closed. Worse, it will be even less of an adequate response in the future because of increasing population, and other trends.

So the story does provide a jolt. It gives the reader a nasty shove. But just like a shove that pushes someone out of the way of a swiftly moving vehicle, this shove can save lives—not the lives of the decent people who read this, but the lives of the people they will save, if they take the story's message to heart.

The shove is an example of being "cruel to be kind." I sometimes make a similar cruel-to-be-kind statement. I call some kinds of goodness "kiddie goodness." These are *nice* things that people do: give presents, send cards, and other things that make people feel good temporarily. I am not against such kindnesses. People need emotional strokes, so I would say that some "kiddie goodness" is necessary. But people who do these things need to consider their motivations. Often people enjoy doing nice things. It makes them feel good about themselves. It gets them the attention and approval of others.

Getting some attention from others is an important psychological need. This is well-documented. I'm not asking people to be cold to each other in order to do only strategic long-range actions. I'm just saying that the survival of many people—billions of people in this century—requires that people do more high-leverage actions.

That is why the even the brutal ending of the story is appropriate. There *is* such a thing as too late. I know this is not a message that people like to hear. The phrase "It's too late" usually means that you've missed out on something or that you've failed. But I am thinking of two extreme meanings of "It's too late." The first meaning is that someone is going to lose their life. The second meaning is that one day it may be too late for most or all of humanity, if people don't do enough high-leverage actions in time.

So, if you are going to do this, I am begging you to start as soon as possible.

*Past a certain point, loving is a learning experience,
and learning is a loving experience.*