

Good Intentions

Haven't we all heard that "the road to hell is paved with good intentions!"? Some may even think that it is a quote from the Bible. Perhaps it's a phrase loosely based on Matthew 7:21-23. Near the end of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount He says "*Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord!' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father, who is in heaven.*"²² *Many will ask Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, in Your name driven out demons, and in Your name performed many miracles?'*"²³ *Then I shall tell them frankly, 'I never knew you. Depart from Me, you who do what is evil!'"*

As Lutheran Christians we can simply "explain away" this sobering passage by categorising it as a warning against self-righteousness. Indeed, it is that! Note that this "Day of Judgment" comment from the Judge Himself is His own summation of His famous sermon just before He concluded with the parable of the storm testing the two foundations. "Good intentions" serve to justify self and is no foundation. Can we imagine the impact these words had on its first hearers? We don't really have to imagine as Matthew 7:28-8:1 describes their reaction: "*When Jesus finished speaking these Words, the crowds were amazed at His teaching.*"²⁹ *For He used to teach them as one who had authority and not like their scribes.*"^{8:1} *After Jesus had come down from the mountain, large crowds followed Him."*

How might these words from Jesus' first full recorded sermon impact us today? Hitting us hard, these words wake us up out of our own comfortable, spiritual tendency toward self-righteousness.

Perhaps try the following take for a personal fit: On that day many will say, "Lord, Lord, did we not preach pro-life sermons in Your name, and didn't we march in a pro-life rally a few times? And didn't we vote for pro-life politicians too?" Now these actions are indeed virtuous to be sure, (as are the actions cited above in Matthew 7:22), but....

What stinging words would follow such a defence? "*I never knew you. Depart from Me, you who do what is evil!*" For in spite of your "good intentions," still thousands of lives of unborn souls were brutally slaughtered each day across your land. Pragmatic toleration of indescribable evil in your nation is bearing its fruit. You bemoan the destruction of your nation's history and constitution by evil anarchists, Marxists and atheists; but, in actuality, you watched as this evil destroyed a whole generation to whom that legacy should have been entrusted. Those who survived the abortion holocaust, were, with good intentions, sent off to liberal universities to have their minds reprogrammed from the Christian principles they may have received earlier.

Evil will always exist in a fallen, sinful world, but woe to those who "know better" and tolerate it (Matthew 23:1-36, Rev. 2:12-29). And do not "good intentions" blur the clarity of evil having its way? This is brought out in Matthew 16:23, as Jesus admonishes the "anti-Christ" in Peter with the words, "*Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me, because you do not have in mind the things of God but the things of human beings.*" "Good intentions" do not win a war. "Good intentions" do not rescue a nation. "Good intentions" do not save the soul.

Thanks be to God who had more than "good intentions" toward us! Jesus, who started His sermon in Matthew 5 with the "Beatitudes" concludes with a statement that our "good intentions" could never fulfil such ideals. The Beatitudes can only be and have been completely fulfilled in Christ through His incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and ascension. May we, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit unto true saving faith, never offer a defence based on our good intentions, but solely on the good accomplishments of our Saviour for us and on our behalf. In other words, who is in the subject of the sentence, and who is the object? Here we may take admonition and comfort from the words of Jesus in Luke 18:10-14: "*Two men went up to the Temple to pray. One was a Pharisee, and the other a tax-collector.*"¹¹ *The Pharisee stood and prayed this about himself: 'God, I thank You that I am not like other people: robbers, wrongdoers, adulterers or even like this tax-collector.*"¹² *I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all my income.'*"¹³ *However, the tax-collector, standing at a distance, did not even want to look up to heaven but kept beating his chest and saying, 'God, be propitiated to me, the sinner!'*"¹⁴ *I tell you, this man, rather than the other, went home justified. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted."* The Pharisee's "good intentions" offer an unheard defence, whereas the tax-collector knows God is the subject of salvation and he the object of God's mercy. Doesn't Christ statements to the sheep and goats in Matthew 25 also indicate that intentions don't save?

For Jesus to know us is for us to know and trust Him as the one and only Saviour of our souls. Those who attempt to save themselves through their "good intentions" do not really know the Saviour, and their sins of commission and omission still cling to them. Through the holy absolution (bought with the Lamb's holy blood shed on the cross) lavished upon a humble and contrite heart (Psalm 51), "good intentions" are forgiven. Only then may one be empowered to fight the good fight of faith for the wellbeing of others while all to His glory, not ours.