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Presentation Transcript
Is Being Good Good Enough?
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Good afternoon to all of you. It's nice to see you all again. I was talking some time ago to a young adult who had left the faith in practice of our Church of God tradition. He no longer keeps the Sabbath or the holy days. He no longer believes in eating only the clean foods. He didn't see any need any longer to adhere to all *ten* of the Ten Commandments. He implied that he was sleeping with someone though he's not married. He told me, though, what really mattered, he had decided after a lot of thought, was to be a good person. It's so much less restrictive and so liberating. You don't have to go to church any more and act like a hypocrite. There's no more struggling with the ugliness of church politics. No more being judged by a group of people who have a critical eye. No restrictive Sabbath observance. No getting off for holy days. Just treat people with respect and try not to hurt others. Contribute to society by obeying that much less restrictive law of the land. Donate to charity. Help people who need help. I know so many people who believe just the same way. Don't you? And we really like talking to those people, don't we, because they are nice people. They don't want to hurt anybody. They're responsible socially. And they make a contribution wherever they go to society and to their families.

I have a friend who's like that. He's kind to children. He's done a great job of raising his child. He's monogamous. He pays his taxes scrupulously. He's civic minded. All his career he's been intent on making a contribution to other people. In ways, he's a better Christian than many of the people I've encountered in the church over the years. And yet, he's not sure there's a God. He believes he should try to be a good person – and by that he means that he wants to help and contribute more than he takes back and that he shouldn't hurt other people. This idea is just so pervasive in our culture. That's pretty much what a lot of people believe is the moral standard. It's just to not hurt others and try to add, instead of taking away from. And those of us in the Church of God, who have interaction with society, meet many people who believe that being good is enough, and who do a good job of being good people – very kind-hearted. It's really inspiring to meet people like that.

Well, I'd like to pose a question to you? Is being good good enough? Now there's a reason I want to explore this question with you. Many of us have believed otherwise. We believe there

is a God. We believe that He alone gets to decide what good is. We know that He says that good is defined by His laws, and that good encompasses more than just treating others well and contributing to society. There are other things that are necessary. And we've believed this way for a very long time – most of us. Some of us have been in the church all our lives – and however long that is, that's all our experience with it. And I've noticed something about people who believe something for a long time. Over time they become satisfied to simply do what God wants, while the reasons for doing so are dim in the mind. People that are like that – who do things – do the right thing, but don't have a clear remembrance of why they started doing them in the beginning – are at risk. And their children are at risk. Eventually they have children – usually – their children learn what to do because they're taught to do it, and because they can see what their parents are doing, and the other people that they know that believe that way, but unless the reasons for doing so are explained, then they are not clear to them. So it's not only important to teach to *do* the right thing, but also to explain to them *why* we do it.

So what I'd like to do today is to shine some light on a few of the reasons why we try to obey the Law of God, rather than simply trying to be a good person like everybody else around us that we encounter day in and day out in our lives. Like all the people that your kids encounter at school – and at college. And again, I'm doing this because if we want to have a strong church, and if we want to pass our faith on to the next generation, then we need to be to articulate our reasons to those who are younger. And that is a responsibility that's laid on every one of us – not just on parents. We're *all* told that we should be able to give an answer for the hope that lies within us. And that answer needs to be delivered to our children, as well as to the adults that we encounter in our daily lives.

The Law of God is a good way to live. It's a law for this life that we live. The Bible says a lot about the Law of God. In Psalms 19, verse 7 and 8, it says:

Psa. 19:7-8 – *The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul. The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple. The statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart. The commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes.* So scriptures like this – and there are many, many of them – tell us that the Law shows us how to be good, how to be happy, how to be wise, how to be enlightened, how to be in sync with the natural world – connected to the reality of the creation.

I was talking to a Starbucks' employee last week. And she was telling me that Starbucks trains all their employees to very carefully do a few simple things. One of the interesting things about Starbucks is, you can go into a Starbucks store anywhere and you get exactly the same product. It's amazing how they can do that. Well, one of the things that they teach their employees is one of those simple things – to respect people that work for you at whatever level you happen to be in the organization. If you're the CEO, then you take care of, and consider the feelings and needs of all those under you. If you're a store manager, then you allow for the needs of the employees that work for you.

They have flex time there. People that work for Starbucks get to choose the hours that they want to work pretty much. You might not all the time, but a good bit of the time, you get to decide when you're going to be working, and when you're going to be off. And the reason for

that is because Starbucks knows that the people that work for them have a life outside of Starbucks, and they want to have respect for that. They know that if people are happy and productive in that other life, the chances are good when they come to work, they're going to be happy there, too. Doesn't that just make so much sense? It does, doesn't it?

And you know, people at Starbucks, even if they only work part-time, and even though the law does not require it, they can still be part of a stock options program. They can be involved in a 401k plan. They have a medical program for part-time employees. They have respect for the people that work there. If you're a barista making coffee – not the CEO, but the guy that's the lowest in the hierarchy of jobs at Starbucks – then your job is to respect the people who come into the store. And the same way you're respected by your manager, you show respect to the customers. You try to do what's going to make them happy. You try to learn their names and you try to provide exactly what they want in a timely manner. If somebody buys a shot of espresso, and it's not hot enough, it gets tossed and another one gets made. Now, Starbucks has been around for a while, haven't they? They've been in business for quite a while. I know it didn't come to New Mexico until just a few years ago, but it's been in Seattle for a long, long time, which is where they began. You know that even though that company's been around for quite a few years, it's still in a giant growth surge. Did you know that? They're still building Starbucks so fast they can't fill them up with employees! Their profits are just shooting out the ceiling. They're making money hand over fist. They're growing like crazy. So this respect thing, it works, doesn't it? It works! You walk into Starbucks and you feel like the people are generally pleased to be there, have a positive attitude, do a good job, give you a great cup of coffee that's it's exactly the same in some remote place, like Cincinnati, Ohio, as it is in an neighborhood Starbucks near your home right here in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

What is respect? What is respect? Let's go to Galatians 5, verse 14.

Gal. 5:14 – *For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this, you shall love your neighbor as yourself.* So biblical talk for respect is to love your neighbor as your yourself. It's the same thing. And all these people that want to be good people, what they're trying to do is love other people like they'd like to be taken care of. If you go into a coffee house, don't you want a good quality cup of coffee? Well, you do. So, if you're making the coffee, you try to make that kind of cup of coffee for them. It's based on the law of God, whether they know or not. The Bible did come before Starbucks. It was first, right? Yes.

So, taking care of the needs of others as you would like others to take care of you. That's what it is. So this company has applied a biblical principle – a principle that's built into the creation and into human nature – principle for this moral life. And because they're diligently trying to apply it, they are being blessed. So, the Law of God is a light to show us the way to live a good, moral life, and to be happy and prosperous and all that sort of thing. We definitely should teach our children that.

I was talking to my good friend, who does not know if God exists – he's a professional counselor – and he was telling me that when people pay him in cash for his services, he always reports it as income. Now, how many people do you know that do that? That work in

business on their own and receive cash? Most of the time it goes in the pocket, and it never gets reported. He doesn't. He obeys the law. He doesn't cheat on paying his taxes. I asked him why he did that, and he said, "I don't like worrying about being caught." Didn't have anything to do with God. Didn't have anything to do with being civic-minded – although, I think, if you questioned him enough, you'd get to that, too. But he just likes to keep things simple. He said, "I find that I'm a happier person if I don't have to worry about that." So he values a clean conscience and peace of mind more than he values money. Very admirable, isn't it? It is. So, he's honest, which is one of the basic principles of the Bible. You have to worship God in truth, right?

Now I've told this story before, so it's not new to some of you, but I'm going to tell it again, because I like to tell it so much. And this will be the third and final illustration of this point about how the law is good for us if we were never to live again. In this life, the law is a good thing for us. And all the people who are being good people, are applying some parts of the law of God in order to be good. Paul said that the Law of God was written in the hearts of the Gentiles. Most Gentile societies believe the it's wrong to kill somebody, or to lie.

I was eating dinner with a Buddhist man once. He was a Malaysian and he lived in Australia. Part of the reason I was eating with him was because his wife was a member of my church. But he wasn't. He was a Buddhist. And he was in the United States, and had come all the way from Australia, because he worked as a high-level manager for a gigantic U.S. electronics firm. And he was a very successful manager – one of their best managers worldwide. And I had recently moved from a field pastorate to the management of a youth program for a very large – well, I guess no COG is very large – but for one of the larger COGs, and I thought this would be a great chance to get some advice from somebody who was highly trained in management and highly successful. His name was Muan. I said, "Muan, I have a vision for the future of the children in our church." (Now some people, when they hear me say that, think that I'm arrogant. Have you ever thought you knew what to do about something? Well, that's what I thought. I thought I knew what to do for the children in our children. I'm sorry if that's offensive to people. Don't you think it's about time somebody figured out what to do with them? I'm not sure I know all the answers, but at that point, I had a vision for the future of the children of our church. And I still believe I know what they need to grow spiritually, and I think I know how to provide it for them.) And at that time, I had, in this organization, seven men around the nation who were regional coordinators in this youth program. So I was asking Muan, "How can I share this vision with them and get them engaged in doing this?"

Here's his answer to that question. I'm not sure he was really answering that question so much. I think he was thinking, "Boy, this guy is way back in the weeds! He needs some preliminary instruction before we even get to that one." But here's what he told me. He said that he started out for his company as a technician – not a manager. And as all big companies do – and this makes no sense whatsoever – if you're really a good technician, they take you and turn you into a manager – which is two whole different skill sets altogether! But he said, "When they made me a manager, I realized that I would soon lose my technical edge. And the people working for me would know more about the details about our very technical work because they would be technicians." And he said, "I realized that my success would be completely reliant on them. If they were not successful as technicians, I was not going to be

successful as a manager. So I drove my stake in the ground. I asserted my right to direct the effort, but I also told them that I would be completely dedicated to their success. And I became their *servant* to help them in any way I could – to be successful.” So I’m sitting there listening to this Malaysian man – this Buddhist – and I became aware of two things while I was listening to him. Well, actually, I became aware of one thing. Another thing I already knew, but it came back to my mind again.

The thing that I became aware of while I was listening to him was that I was learning more from a Buddhist about how to be a servant than I had ever learned from anybody in the ministry of my church. Sad, but true. Jesus told us that we should not lord it over others, but serve them, didn’t He? And here’s this Buddhist man telling me how you do that in every day real terms.

What was the second thing I understood? Well, I recall that I was sitting across the table from a multi-millionaire. He owned two Ferraris. I don’t know how many others cars he owned. He had several mansions in the Far East and Australia. He was one of the most fabulously successful managers in an company of successful managers. I saw that that he also was applying a principle from scripture that’s a part of this natural world – service! He also was a good person. He was a good person to work for. You got taken care of when you worked for Muan. And Muan made it easy for you to be successful and to take care of him.

So there’s another way that the Law of God is so good for people in this life. And I don’t think Muan was really thinking about being a good Christian. I think he was thinking about being a good Buddhist. But Buddha and Jesus taught people to be servants. Was God before Buddha? Yeah! So that all goes back to God, right?

The Law just shows us how to be good people. And if we follow it, we don’t have to discover things the hard way. We can them pointed out to us by God, and we don’t have to suffer all the problems that come from being contrary to the natural world. We don’t have to experiment to find out what works. We can let God show us and get started on it right away. It’s like the Psalmist said, “The law is a lamp unto our feet and guide unto our path.” It’s shows us how to live a good life and be good people. Even people who don’t know God, are interested in these principles, because they want to be happy, successful people. And the Law works, because it is the basis for the natural world. God make the whole creation to work within the Law.

So we teach our children to obey the Law for this reason. And if we do, we’re doing a *very* good thing, aren’t we? But if that’s all we teach them, we’ve left off, perhaps, the most important thing of all – or most important *things* of all – about the Law, because the Law is not only for this life, but it’s also for the next.

Let’s go back to something we read earlier – back in Psalms 19, verse 7.

Psa. 19:7 – *The law of God is perfect, converting the soul.* Oh, it not just about how to become wealthy and happy. It’s about how to become converted. What does that word mean?

What does it mean – converting? Well, in the New Testament, that word is used again in a different language in Acts 3, verse 19. If you'll go there with me – Acts 3:19 – Peter said:

Acts 3:19 – *Repent, therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that the times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that He may send Jesus Christ, who is preached to you before.* So there's that word again. The word means *to turn about* or *to turn towards*. The noun form of it – to convert – means *a turning about* or *around* or *conversion* – a turning from and a turning to. That's what it means. So when a person becomes converted, they have turned away from their own things to God. That's what the Law can do for you. The Law is the *way* to do that. We turn *from* our own way of thinking and doing *toward* the Law of God. And that is the way we become converted.

So conversion has to do with a relationship with God – a turning away from something *to* God. Right? So we're going into a relationship with Him – into connection. So the Law of God can produce for us a relationship with our God, can't it? And that's for the *next* life, as well as for this.

You know my good friend who didn't cheat on his taxes? Who was obeying the Law of God so that he wouldn't have a guilty conscience? He was obeying the law so he could be at peace, but God was not even a part of his thinking, was He? He doesn't know he can live forever with God. He's missing something, isn't he – something very, very important. Starbucks isn't thinking about God either. And Muan may have been thinking about Buddha, but not about the God of the Bible.

So, when we observe the laws of God, we need to be diligent to teach our children that obeying God's Law is the way to take God into our hearts, and the way to let God take us into His. There is this life to think about. We all want to live a happy life. The Law shows us how. But then there's *more*, isn't there? There's the life *after* this one. And we need to focus our children on that life also.

When they're little, they're not ready to think in detail about something so abstract, but as they enter teenage, they can think more deeply about eternal life. And we need to challenge them to think about it, and to stretch them, and to help them think about the choices they make and how they will impact their relationship with the *only* One who can give them that kind of life. We need to help them understand that the Law of God will show them how to be successful, not only with other people, and financially, in this life, but also how to be successful with God.

I was looking on the Web one day, at one of my former organizations I was in, and there was a link to their summer camp program. And I was interested to see that one of the young kids that grew up in one of my churches, and that I was very close to, was now running one of their regional summer camps. And since it's in the general area that church was in, a lot of the people that were on that Web site – the kids – were children of people that had been members of my congregation. I think those children were probably very small when I was there, but now they're teenagers or college age. And I was interested to see that the focus at the summer camp was to quote "know Jesus." And I saw an editorial written by a young camper who

detailed his efforts to figure out what knowing Jesus meant. And he never came to any conclusions in his editorial – I was interested to see – and I know this boy’s parents. And it’s a sad thing to me that this boy’s parents used to know, in a very real way, *how* to know Jesus, and yet they have given up, in all their doctrinal changes, many of the avenues that God provides us to know Him. And I know *so* many children who parents have thrown down the lamp and have lost the way. And that’s a very sad thing to me. When people do that, almost without exception, their children will follow them into the darkness. We, as parents, are supposed to lead our children to God, not *away from* Him. God wants us *all* our children. And God help us if we don’t do right by them spiritually.

Speaking to the greater audience today – those of you who are younger – who hope to have children in the future – *you* need to be laying a strong spiritual foundation *now*. You need to understand *why* you do what you’ve been taught to do, so that you can help your children understand it and have a strong foundation later. And those of us who are older, who have children now, need to be sure we make that connection between the Law and the relationship with God.

But I’m really just talking theory right now, aren’t I. Let’s get specific. Every now and then, we read of a children who’s been kept in the basement. You’ve seen articles like that in the paper. They’re chained up or they’re in a cage or they’re locked in a closet. Authorities find them sleeping on a urine soaked mattress and wearing filthy clothing. Usually they’re disabled in some way. And that makes it even the more horrendous and heart rending. And in all of these cases, children who are not allowed sufficient contact and connection with other human beings, their development suffers. They’re usually delayed developmentally. Their brains are usually smaller than normal, because of the lack of stimulation. They’re excluded from their family. They’re not considered. They’re not involved. They’re left out of family plans. They’re not taken where the rest of the family goes. Even if they’re given food and water, if left that way – without love, without affection, without stimulation, without inclusion, without contact – they will die. And when we hear these situations, they tear at our hearts. And we think, “What kind of people would do this to their children?” Because, if we’ll just stop and think about it, the idea of an unwanted child is an obscene idea.

We’ll I want you think in your mind’s eye for a moment about something that’s even more obscene than that. I want you think of a child who is loved, who’s cherished, who’s parents have wonderful plans for his future, who are educating him in the right way, who are dedicated to his health and well-being. And I want you to picture that child walking down in the basement and locking *himself* in the closet. We never hear stories like that, do we? We don’t hear about because it just doesn’t happen. Children are wired to love and to be loved by parents. They crave it. They can’t help it. And even when parents are cruel or manipulative or emotionally withholding, they still want to love and to be loved. They just can’t go down in the basement on their own. If you knew of a child who did that, that would really be an anomaly, wouldn’t it – a sick situation? And you’d wonder what could possibly cause that.

Well, do you remember the young man I told you about at the beginning of the sermon? The one who no longer obeyed the Law, but was trying to be a good person? He’s gone to the basement. He’s thrown off his connection with his family – I’m not talking about his physical

family, but with the family of God. And God wants him. God loves him. God has big plans for him that span eternity. He is the apple of God's eye. God cherishes him. And yet he's gone off and locked himself in the closet and shut himself away from what's going to make him healthy, and what's going to help him develop spiritually. He's left the presence of God and dismissed God's destiny for him.

How has he done that? What happens when somebody walks away from God? When they say that they no longer want to keep the Ten Commandments, but just be a good person? Well, I'm only going to consider one very specific example – and believe me, which ever example I would pick would just be the tip of the iceberg. But the fourth commandment says that we should honor the Sabbath day and keep it holy. He's not following that one any longer. And in the Law of Moses, the weekly Sabbath is also connected with seven other Sabbaths – the holy days. And in Colossians 2, in verses 16 and 17, Paul said:

Col. 2:16-17 – *So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival, or a new moon, or Sabbaths, which are shadows of things to come.* So the Sabbaths – the holy days – the observances required by the Law of God – are provided to teach about *things to come*. Well, what's to come? Well, what's the Bible all about? The Bible is God teaching us what incredible things He has in store for us, and showing us how much He loves us. And this young man has walked away from that. That's what he's done.

My good friend, Jim O'Brien, said recently that the Sabbaths are a *roadmap* to God. That's true, isn't it? They are God's way of showing us what's in store for us – what big plans He has for us and how much He loves us. In fact, all the Law of God is a roadmap into the heart of God – how to draw close to God and how to connect and how to please Him – how to build a relationship with God. And when we throw off that law, it's as though a little child has gone to the closet and excluded him or herself from the very things most desperately needed – care and inclusion from the One who loves them the most. It's sad and it's perverse.

God not only wants us to be good, He wants us to be *close* to Him, and *know* Him, and to *understand* His mind for us, and what He has in store for us and what we're going to be doing for all eternity with Him. And you can't get that by just being a good person. You're completely *blind* to it – completely excluded from that knowledge.

There's one last point that I'd like to cover today regarding our instruction to our children about the Law of God. Let's come at it from this direction. We always teach our children to show appreciation when someone does something for them, don't we? We want them to be appreciative of the things that other people do for them. We don't want them to dismiss the efforts of other people. We want them to understand that when others do things for them, it's done out of love. And that's honoring to them. And so they should express appreciation for that. We don't want them to think that all the help that they are given by others is deserved. That would mean that they're just spoiled. Nobody likes a brat, right? So we want to teach our children to be appreciative. Nobody likes it when they're not. And it's so important that they learn to express appreciation. And this is not natural to children, because they don't know how hard it is to do all the things that other people do for them. They haven't gotten there yet. So they're oblivious to that. So we have to teach them to do that, don't we?

Well, *we* are God's children, aren't we? Jesus did something for us, didn't He? And He didn't buy us a bag of popcorn at the movies. And He didn't invite us out to the park for an afternoon. He *died* for us so that we could live with Him forever. He bought eternal life for us by sacrificing His own life. And what should our response be to what He's done for us? Are we like those children that don't really know how hard it is when somebody does something for us? We don't really realize how much we needed what's been for us? How hard it was for Him to sacrifice Himself for us? Are we like spoiled children in that way? Who think we deserve it? Who thinks God exists to please us? Who doesn't need to be thanked because we didn't ask Him to do it for us anyway? Who are so self-centered that we can't recognize love when it comes our way? Or do we realize how much we needed the gift that's been given to us? Or do we understand that the gift *proves* His love for us?

We are God's children, right? So it's okay for me to make an analogy between physical children and us as the children of God. And the question is, "Have we been well taught? Or are we like spoiled brats?" What can we do to acknowledge the gift that God has given us – the freedom from our past sins? What can we do to demonstrate appreciation for that? To show love back to the One who loves us?

II Cor. 5:15 – *And He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again.* His death holds out an expectation to us that we will respond to Him. Do you know that Paul said that he was glad that he was a minister, not of the old covenant, which brings death, but of the new, which brings life. Under the old covenant, you obeyed the law so that you wouldn't get stoned or hung or whatever. And there's a whole different reason for obeying the Law now.

Rom. 12:1 – *I beseech you, therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service.* That word *reasonable* means logical or rational. It follows that, since God gave His life for us that we would want to give ours to Him, if we understand what that all means. Since Christ surrendered His life for us, it follows that we – not being unappreciative and bratty children – would freely and lovingly want to live our lives to please Him. And it says – verse 2 – *Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.* Don't be conformed to this world.

What is one of the ways of this world? Well one of them is the idea that being a good person is good enough. We can't be good people without obeying God. And we can't *know* God without obeying God's Law. There's so much more that we can be and experience, besides just living a good mortal life. And if we follow the Law, it will lead us into a relationship with the Ones who made us – our Father and our Elder Brother. And at that point, the Law will *not* be a restriction. It will not be an exterior code. It will not be a formula for spiritual qualification, but it will be a *way of life* written on our hearts. We need to keep the Law of God and we need to remember *why* we keep it. And we need to transmit that understanding to our children by everything that we say and do, so that they can not only see us keeping it, but

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also understand that the Law is the light that shines the way into the heart of God and into eternal life.