

The Theology of “The Good Place” Romans 3:10-11,13-17, 23;

Eph. 2:8-10; II Cor. 5:17 3/17/19

NBC’s award-winning show, “The Good Place,” wrapped up its third season about a month ago. It’s a well-written and well-acted comedy that manages to raise serious theological and ethical issues. I would give it a PG rating, so you’ll want to preview it before watching it with your kids or grandkids. At any rate, in the show’s first episode, Eleanor Shellstrop (played by Kristen Bell) has unexpectedly died, and finds herself in “The Good Place,” much to her surprise. She had led a self-absorbed, no-thought-for-others kind of life, and wonders how she got to the good place. She eventually figures out that the only reason she is there is that a clerical error has been made! In time, she confesses her situation to her new friend, Chidi, a former professor of moral ethics, who teaches her about moral philosophy in an attempt to help her become a good person so she can fit in in the good place!

Will she really be able to change from being a selfish, narcissistic person to someone who is truly good? Can anyone really change? That’s one of the central questions the show explores.

We’ll talk more about that question a little later, but I’d like to start with the question of how people get into ‘the good place’- heaven. The show explains it like this. (CLIP from opening episode) So, on the show,

there's an extensive point system with your good deeds and bad deeds all receiving a positive or negative score. Only those with really high scores get into the good place. Such a system has real appeal to us Americans, who like to think we're smart and independent and self-sufficient. In fact, the idea that God weighs all our good and bad deeds to determine who gets into heaven- that's how many Americans believe it really works!

But how does such a system stack up against Christian beliefs? Not too well! God does hold us accountable for how we've lived our lives. The show gets that right. The problem is that none of us is good enough to offset our sin, even if such a thing were possible. None of us in this room would make it into the Good Place. Listen to Paul's words from Romans 3.

*<sup>10</sup>as it is written: "There is no one who is righteous, not even one;<sup>11</sup>there is no one who has understanding, there is no one who seeks God. <sup>13</sup>"Their throats are opened graves; they use their tongues to deceive." "The venom of vipers is under their lips." <sup>14</sup>"Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness."<sup>15</sup>"Their feet are swift to shed blood; <sup>16</sup>ruin and misery are in their paths,<sup>17</sup>and the way of peace they have not known." <sup>18</sup>"There is no fear of God before their eyes."<sup>23</sup>since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; (Rom. 3:10, 11, 13-17, 23)*

For those hoping that their good deeds will somehow outweigh their bad, making them righteous and suited for God's heaven, these verses are

very bad news! Paul makes it clear that none of us are righteous, that we're all sinners. As Mark Twain put it, "Heaven goes by favor. If heaven went by merit, you would stay out, and your dog would go in." Twain clearly didn't know the dogs Bonnie and I have owned, but the point is a good one. And, if God let us into heaven as we are, we'd ruin it, because we'd continue to do the kinds of hurtful things we do here on earth! And yet we don't like to think of ourselves as sinners.

Some of you have heard about my installation service as pastor of my former church outside Richmond, Virginia. I had invited a long-time mentor, Rev. Dick Hutcheson, to give the sermon. He graciously agreed. I was very excited to have Dick there, but the first point of his sermon really caught me off-guard. He told the congregation that they needed to know that "Dave is a sinner." I think he was trying to help me by reminding the congregation that I was not perfect and that they shouldn't expect perfection out of me. But, he made this point for an awfully long time, repeating the phrase, "Dave is a sinner!" again and again. Another pastor who gave the pastoral prayer picked up on the theme later in the service, praying for "Dave, who is a sinner." This became the theme of the whole service! Not what I had in mind! I know it's true that I'm a sinner, but I don't like to be reminded of it, especially in front of everybody at my new job!

This is the bad news for all of us, not just me! We are all sinners. The good news is that God has provided a Savior to do what we couldn't do for ourselves. Listen to what John the Baptist had to say about Jesus. <sup>29</sup>*The next day (John) saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"* (John 1:29) Our sins aren't weighed on a divine scale against our good deeds; God takes them away through the sacrifice of his Son, Jesus! Or, as Paul puts it in Ephesians 2, <sup>8</sup>*For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—* <sup>9</sup>*not the result of works, so that no one may boast.*" (Eph. 2:8,9)

I love the words of Frederick Buechner on this topic. God says, "I love you... There's only one catch. Like any other gift, the gift of grace can be yours only if you'll reach out and take it. Maybe being able to reach out and take it is a gift too."

How do we reach out and take it? We give up trying to cover up our sins and failures before God and admit that like every other human being, we are sinners, shot through with sin and self-centeredness. And we ask God to forgive us and make us new. It's that simple. And it's that difficult. You get to choose if you'll receive God's grace or not.

Back to our analysis of "The Good Place." As Christians, we have to agree with the show that how we conduct our lives is important. But we

must say that the basic premise of the show- that we get into “the good place” by virtue of doing more good than bad- is fatally flawed, because there is no room for grace in it, and the sacrifice of Jesus for our sins is rendered unnecessary. The show demonstrates the practical difficulties of a point-system-based salvation. For one, you can never have any assurance that you’re good enough to get into heaven; You’re in constant fear about your eternal future. Relying on God’s grace is far better, and it’s not fiction! Let’s move on.

The show raises a second question that is also important. Can human beings really change? That’s what Eleanor, and her friends Chidi, Tahani, and Jason are trying to do, for it turns out they also don’t belong in the good place! At first, they want to become good so they can fit in and not be discovered as imposters, but later they seem to genuinely want to be good. Can that really happen? Can a twelve year-old who disobeys his parents, talks back to his teachers, and cares about no one but himself change? Can a drug-addicted teenage girl, who has sold her body to support her drug habit change? Can a young man who participates every day in business practices that are dishonest, practices that cheat good people out of their money- can that person really change? How about the embittered woman, who sees slights and offenses in the actions of most everyone who comes in contact with her, who gossips about and slanders

people constantly- can she really change? How about the alcoholic grandparent, or the man who sexually abuses children, or the greedy lender, or the corrupt law enforcement officer? Can they really change?

“The Good Place” recognizes how hard change is but is fairly optimistic about our potential for change. We see significant changes for the best in the character and inclinations of Eleanor and her friends. They become less self-absorbed, kinder, and even forgiving. In that way the show is consistent with Christian teaching. Consider the changes in the lives of two founders of Christianity, Peter and Paul. Peter changed from being a hot-headed coward with no filter, to being one of the pillars of the church, a man who encouraged others to face their fears, a man who gave his own life as a martyr rather than deny his faith.

Paul was a brutal persecutor of Christians, who after his dramatic encounter with Jesus, planted Christian churches all over the ancient world, enduring great hardship and persecution. He wrote most of our New Testament, including that wonderful chapter about love in I Cor. 13. He also gave his life as a Christian martyr. We could tell countless other stories of people whose lives have dramatically changed, including St. Augustine, St. Patrick, Martin Luther, slave-trader John Newton, Watergate criminal Chuck Colson, former President George W. Bush, and many of you!

So, yes, Christians believe in change. As Paul himself wrote, “<sup>17</sup> *So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!*” (II Cor. 5:17) The show also gets it right that change often comes in community. On the show, the four friends teach and support each other as they try to become good people. In Christian faith, that is the role of the church, of Christian friends. We try to help each other become more the people God is calling us to be. The people God created us to be!

The difference between human change on “The Good Place” and how change is understood in Christian theology is that Christians are deeply suspicious about the human potential for change apart from God’s intervention in our lives. We do believe that some change is possible. After all, God is at work everywhere. But ultimate change in the human heart only comes through an act of God in our lives, through the work of the Spirit of Christ, who we invite into our lives. That’s why Paul can talk about virtues like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control as fruits of God’s Spirit at work in our lives. These things don’t come naturally to us. “*If anyone is in Christ there is a new creation,*” Paul says.

Changing lives is a God-thing. We can choose to cooperate or not with God’s work in us. I’m glad for a show like “The Good Place,” that

raises deep and profound issues about spiritual matters in a fun way. But I'm even more glad for the scriptures which tell us about the good news of God's love for us in Jesus Christ- a love that doesn't depend on our good deeds, and a love that is not content to leave us as we are, but wants to shape us into being the people God created us to be.