

Good Cop, Bad Cop

[Mark 9:38-50](#)

Rev. Curtis Bablitz

September 29, 2024

If you've ever watched any police shows or movies, you've might have heard of something called Good Cop, Bad Cop. On TV, anytime they need to interrogate a suspect, one of the police officers will pretend to be their best friend, comforting and encouraging, offering helpful advice or a listening ear, and the other will act like their worst enemy, badgering and bullying, threatening them with the full force of the law and maybe a little more, if they don't confess immediately. The idea is that one way or another, the police will get what they want – by offering reward and punishment, using the carrot or the stick, they'll get the suspect to tell them what they want to know. Now, I have no idea if this “Good Cop, Bad Cop” routine is a real thing – I doubt Law and Order reruns are a good place to learn actual law enforcement techniques – but you can see this idea in more than just policing. Parenting sometimes feels like a game of Good Cop Bad Cop – one parent is the disciplinarian who insists that the child must eat the vegetables on their plate no matter how long they sit there, while the other one softens them up with promises of dessert if they just finish five more bites. Good Cop, Bad Cop motivates people with kind and friendly promises of future reward on the one hand, and threats of future punishment on the other.

And sometimes when we read the Bible, we might think we see the same thing. We might start to read the entire story of God's relationship with humanity as one big game of Good Cop, Bad Cop. We read about God's love and compassion and grace for humanity, saving us from sin and death, promising a place for us in the heavenly kingdom, but then there's all those demands for

obedience, for holiness, following the rules OR ELSE. Maybe you felt that way when you heard the passage we read this morning from the gospel of Mark. It starts off so nice and friendly, with Jesus telling his disciples, “No one who performs a miracle in my name will be able to speak evil of me. Anyone who isn’t actively working against us, I count as a friend. If anyone gives you even a cup of water because you belong to the Messiah, I tell you the truth, that person will surely be rewarded.” Aww, thanks Jesus! That’s so nice of you. And then all of a sudden, out of nowhere ... If your hand makes you sin, cut it off! If your eye makes you sin, gouge it out! You don’t want to end up in Hell, do you, with the immortal maggots and the everlasting fire? Is that what you want? Whoa, calm down there Jesus! Within a couple verses, we go from cozy and cuddly to lopping off appendages and one-way deep sea diving. It’s hard to read this and understand exactly what Jesus expects of us, and it’s hard to understand how we’re supposed to communicate this to the world. When Christians carry the message of Jesus Christ to the people around us, which message are we carrying? Good Cop or Bad Cop? Kumbayah or Cut it out? Because clumsily switching back and forth – telling people that of course Jesus loves you, just the way you are, but also the way you are is unacceptable and you need to stop – following up “Jesus loves you” with “you’re going to hell,” well, people tend not to listen to either part. So how do we make sense of this passage? As Jesus’ followers, as the church of Christ here in the world, are we supposed to be good Cops, or bad Cops?

Well, if you take a closer look at that passage from Mark, you might spot the answer. This conversation starts with John telling Jesus that someone was using his name to cast out evil, but because they weren’t one of Jesus’ approved followers, the disciples told him to stop. And the disciples clearly think they’ve done something great here – John sounds so pleased with himself, and he’s clearly

expecting to get a reward from Jesus for protecting his name from misuse. The disciples have appointed themselves as Jesus' defenders, Jesus' police force, the ultimate arbiters for who is a true follower of Jesus and who isn't, but as it turns out, that isn't what Jesus wants. Jesus tells the disciples that their job isn't to police the world around them, to bring down the hammer of judgment on anyone and everyone they meet. No, to the people outside of their community, to the world around them, they are to be gracious and loving and welcoming – they are to assume that every good deed, every act of kindness they receive, no matter how small, is that person's first step on the road towards becoming a follower of Jesus Christ, to treat every person who isn't actively trying to hurt them as an ally and friend, not someone to be badgered and berated into the kingdom, but someone to be loved and welcomed. But if his disciples really want to act like Jesus' enforcers, like moral policemen insisting on obedience and holiness, in that case there is only one place for them to start. With themselves. All those harsh warnings about holiness and obedience and unquenchable fire, those are for when Christ's followers look inward, at our own behavior, at our own hands and feet and eyes. Once we start following Jesus, once we declare our allegiance to his kingdom and accept his forgiveness and grace, we are committing ourselves to serving Christ with discipline and diligence in everything we do, and if anything should get in the way of that goal, we need to get rid of it, cut it off and throw it into the sea. Looking out at the world, we are to give love and welcome and grace, and looking inward at ourselves, we are to commit ourselves to being holy, to following Jesus in everything we do. We can see this same thing in the reading about the Apostle Paul from the book of Acts. Paul famously had no hesitation about calling the church to live lives of holiness and obedience; all his letters to the church are full of instructions and teaching and challenge, guiding followers of Jesus Christ on how they should live as part of the church. But when Paul speaks

to people outside of the church gathered in Athens, Paul speaks with love and welcome – he points out all the ways God is already at work in their lives, in the altar to the unknown God, in the Greek poetry he quotes. Paul recognizes that God is already close to these Athenians, they are already on their way to becoming followers of Christ, and they just need the invitation and welcome to take that step and join in.

That's Christ's call to the church: looking out at the world, we are to give love and welcome and grace, and looking inward at ourselves, we are to commit ourselves to being holy, to following Jesus in everything we do. But all too often we get this backwards – all too often, we look out at the world with judgment and condemnation, we hold a hard line against the perceived evils and troubles we see all around us, but when we look inwards at ourselves we are all too willing to make excuses, to explain away our own transgressions as temporary mistakes; as CS Lewis said, "in our own case we accept excuses too easily; in other people's we do not accept them easily enough." Jesus wants his followers to deal with the logs in our own eyes before we try and take out the specks we think exist in the eyes of the people around us; we are not meant to be the world's moral police force, demanding everyone around us follow these standards we're not even keeping ourselves. When we turn that eye of judgment and condemnation only outward, never inward, the church becomes monstrous, capable of committing terrible acts of evil in the name of holiness and obedience. The story of the Residential schools in Canada is a story of the church forcing our ideas of holiness and obedience on First Nations children, all the while allowing all manner of cruelties and atrocities committed against those children by members of the church to go unnoticed and unpunished. Imagine how different the history of this country would be if the church had given the first peoples of this land love and grace and welcome,

accepting them as people already on their way towards Christ's kingdom, instead of as enemies needing to be civilized and converted and controlled, or if we had held all those within the church who abused and harmed children to the same standard of discipline that Jesus gives his disciples here. To our shame, we gave grace to ourselves and judgment to others instead of the other way around. Jesus' words to his disciples makes it clear that they are not meant to police the world, and if they're going to police someone, it should be themselves – their role, our role, is not to hold the world to account, but to dedicate ourselves each and every day to living lives of holiness and obedience, ridding ourselves of anything that would slow us down or trip us up or move us further away from who Jesus wants us to be.

Now, you might hear that, and say, if that's true – if the only word we can say to the world is all that loving, merciful, forgiving stuff, how can we condemn evil when we see it? How can we oppose injustice when we witness it? Does this mean we're to be silent in the face of cruelty and oppression, just focusing on our own holiness and piety while the world burns around us? And the answer is No. As Christ's people, we are still called to witness to the world, to reveal to the world around us what God desires for them, the good paths that will lead them to righteousness and justice and peace. But the way we do this isn't through control, through dominion, through taking over and demanding obedience from those under our thumb. Jesus tells us that we are to be salt – we are to affect the world around us just through being who we are, by being loving to the world and holy in our own lives. When we hold ourselves to that standard of holiness, when we get rid of everything within us that would lead us away from Jesus and love him with all our hearts and souls and minds, and then let that love extend to the world around us, then our lives become a witness, our presence in the world becomes God's

witness for what the grace of Jesus Christ can accomplish here and now. Lives that look inward with holiness and outwards with love have the power to season the world around them – our love, our holiness, it will have an effect on the people we meet, not by controlling them, not by forcing them to submit to our discipline and follow our commands, but by bringing joy and delight and goodness into the world and making the world a better place through what we say and do. Jesus tells his disciples, you must have the qualities of salt among yourselves and live in peace with others – when you look inward, cultivate holiness, kindness, goodness, obedience in your heart, and then when you look outward, show peace and love to everyone you meet.

And I know that's hard. Trying to be loving to the world and disciplined in our own lives is a difficult thing. But we know we can do it, because that's what Jesus did for us. In his own life, Jesus showed perfect discipline, perfect holiness, perfect obedience in every word and action, every moment of his life, and then he poured out his love for the world, for you and me, for every child of God, every human being he died to save. And if Jesus can do it, then we can too, because Jesus is at work in us, at work in his church, making us holy, making us loving, making us his people more and more each and every day. When Jesus looks at us, he looks at us with love and grace, and even when we fail, even when we fall short, Jesus is willing to go to any lengths to save us from ourselves, to follow us into the depths of the sea, to follow us into pain and suffering and death, even into hell itself, we have his promise that we are never out of reach of the love of Jesus Christ, his power to save and redeem, to heal what has been cut off, to make whole what we have broken. Each and everyday, Jesus Christ is at work in us, making us more holy, making us more loving, and that work will never be done until we meet our savior in the kingdom of God. But each and everyday, we can grow. We can

see ourselves for who we truly are, and work to make ourselves more and more who we are meant to be. We can love the world around us the way Jesus loves us. We can season this world with our words and actions, with love and grace and welcome, so that when people see us, they see will Jesus Christ in us. In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen!