

Introduction

I'M THE WORST

I'm the worst. I really am. You wouldn't know it from looking at me. I'm the son of well-known Christian leaders: My dad is a pastor, and my mom is a best-selling Christian writer. I'm a member of a beloved and idyllic family. I go to church. I've written best-selling Christian books. I make Christian movies. I have a podcast where I talk about faith. I study theology. I give to charity. I even post Scripture verses on my Instagram profile. But it's true—I'm the worst. Right beneath the surface of a good Christian guy lie three decades of bad choices, destructive addictions, cruel words, selfish actions, unfettered lusts, creeping envy, anger issues, constant doubt, prideful thoughts, and a seemingly endless list of fractured and failing parts that make me who I am: the worst. But it's okay. You're the worst too.

I used to believe I was good. It was easy when every pastor, friend, and book told me I was. Especially when they told me that all the bad in the world was over there, with the other people from the other tribe who voted, lived, and believed differently than me. And believing I was good was wonderful. I walked around the world with an assured sense of righteous superiority. I believed I was good . . . until I realized I wasn't.

It wasn't all at once—it was in a million little moments spanning a multitude of years, each pushing me ever closer to the realization that I was just as broken and desperately in need of forgiveness,

help, and redemption as the rest of the world I had grown accustomed to looking down upon.

This was both a terrible and beautiful realization. The terrible part is that I had to look at myself honestly in the proverbial mirror. I had to accept all the darkness that had hid itself beneath the shiny exterior for so long and then reckon with the ramifications of what I had done and who I really was. But the beautiful part is that I was finally able to ask God for help and accept the freeing forgiveness and mercy he offered me, enabling us—my Creator and me—to pick up the broken pieces I had been ignoring for years and slowly put them back together.

Jesus said that “the truth will set you free” (John 8:32). He didn't say it will be particularly pleasant. But freedom makes it all worth it. By facing the truth of who we really are—warts, scars, and blemishes—we free ourselves from the pressure of keeping up the charade we've always known deep down is just a show, and we finally experience the true love and acceptance we've longed for that can only come from someone who sees and knows us completely.

So yes, I'm the worst, but so are you. You might not know it yet, but read on, and together we'll discover the life-changing, freeing act of accepting the reality that we're the worst.

Chapter 1

WE'RE NOT GOOD

I have been all things unholy. If God can work through me, He can work through anyone.

—ATTRIBUTED TO ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI

I can remember the first time I truly realized I wasn't good. I was seventeen years old, living in a whirlwind of growing pains and youthful idiocy that clouded my brain with prideful delusions of grandeur and told me I knew better than the wisdom offered to me by my parents and pastors. Like so many boys, my first realization of my lack of goodness involved a girl. She was a cheerleader and the object of desire of all my friends, and for some reason she liked me. We lay on separate couches one Wednesday afternoon after she had come over to watch TV, and I asked her if she wanted to be my girlfriend. To my utter shock, she said yes. I had never so much as kissed a girl before, and here was a real-life young woman who agreed to go steady with me.

The next week was filled with holding hands at school, nonstop texts on my Nokia, and finally moving to the same couch while watching TV. One night, as I lay in bed texting with her after the world had gone to sleep except for just us two, a moment of adolescent desire overruled all the sermons my youth pastor had given, stating "nothing good happens after midnight," and we decided

that she should come over and sneak through my window. I waited patiently and nervously. The twinges of apprehension that rushed through my body were soon extinguished by the excitement of meeting up with a pretty girl late at night.

After a gentle knock at my window, we lay on my bed. The next thirty minutes were filled with awkward teenage talking and touching, giggling and kissing, and doing things that teenagers do. Soon enough she crawled back through the window, leaving me alone with my thoughts. And while I should have been on cloud nine as she disappeared into the night, I didn't feel the light and fun feeling that the pop songs said I would feel after giving in to my desires. Instead I felt a sudden and heavy darkness fall over me, and with it the terrible realization that I wasn't good. In a moment everything had changed—I had changed. I had always been a good Christian kid, from a good Christian family, who didn't do things all those other sinners out there did, like meet up and make out with girls. But there I was, having to face the fact that I wasn't better than other people, I wasn't the person others thought I was, and I wasn't the good person I thought I was.

I look back at that night now and, while still cringing at the awkwardness, have to smile at the innocence in comparison to the darkness I've experienced in the decade and a half since. But that night, there in the midst of my naive understanding of the world, I realized for the first time that I wasn't as virtuous as I had always believed I was. I realized that it wasn't just the non-Christians, secular celebrities, and sinners out there who were at fault for the "bad" in the world—it was me too.

We broke up not long after, as I was unable to handle the guilt of having done something that, in my mind, excluded me from the title of "good." A couple of weeks later, I found her at youth group and, in a desperate attempt to assuage my mental turbulence, apologized profusely. She smiled, unfazed, and graciously granted me absolution. But still, I look back at that night and remember it as the first time I realized . . . I'm not good.

It's Them

It's no secret the world is a troubling and chaotic place to live during these modern times. Not a day goes by where we don't see another atrocity, tragedy, or dysfunction taking place in every corner of the world. We are all too familiar with the pervasive racism, sexism, poverty, sickness, violence, abuse, greed, bigotry, hate, and anger experienced and displayed by people around the world on an astonishingly regular basis. These affect us all and leave us longing for a better world than the one we currently inhabit—the one that doesn't seem to be making the progress we want it to. The good news, though, is that by watching the news, listening to culture critics, and reading comment sections, it seems we have figured out who's to blame . . .

Them.

You know, *them*. The other people from the other tribe, political persuasion, religion, gender, culture, financial status, or race. Our neighbors, parents, or pastors. They're to blame. *Obviously*. And this is a good and comforting thought. We've become skilled at identifying the people causing all the problems. And what a relief—it always happens to be the ones who aren't like us. While we might have to deal with the terrible realities of a broken world, it's at least nice to know that we're the good guys and they're the bad guys. The only problem is, what if that's not true? What if “they” are not the only ones to blame and instead “we” are?

No, It's Us

There's a great (though unverified) anecdote about the well-known writer G. K. Chesterton. Sometime in the early 1900s, *The London Times* requested essays from prominent writers and thinkers of the day who would respond to the prompt, “What is wrong with the world?” Important people and respected intellectuals from around the city began penning their lengthy and eloquent responses, no doubt detailing the faults of society, people, and government in their wordy displays of intellectualism. But one response stood out

among them all. It said this to the question “What is wrong with the world?”

Dear Sirs,

I am.

Yours, G. K. Chesterton¹

In two words, Chesterton displayed both his pithy genius and the deep, difficult truth that none of us wants to face. The reality is that the real problem in the world is us. All of us. There isn't a person alive today who isn't filled with the same problems we spend our lives pointing out in others. A lot of time is spent analyzing, calling attention to, and pointing out all the ways others are failing—be it online, in the news, or in our homes and workplaces. Rarely does that external, critical gaze turn inward to the selfishness, rage, and despair living in our own hearts.

In a 2016 study conducted by the University of London, researchers found that the vast majority of people believe themselves to be not only “moral” but morally superior to a majority of others.² A 2021 OnePoll survey found that three in four people believe themselves to be “a fundamentally good person,” and almost half believe that they are “better” than everyone else they know.³ This is surprising but also entirely expected. We all want to believe we are good, and even more than that, most of us desire and believe ourselves to be better than others. And maybe those people who believed themselves to be better actually are fundamentally good people, but that entirely depends on what definition of “good” we use.

Jesus ran into this too. He lived in a time in which groups of powerful people had decided and proclaimed they were good—and had identified those who were not. The religious people of the day took great care to make it known just how good they were, often by pointing out and shaming those they proclaimed were not. They evidenced their goodness by outward displays of morality. They kept all the laws, observed all the religious rituals, and even wore

the right clothes so as to fall under the definition of “good” they had created. But then Jesus, this young teacher from backwater Galilee who claimed to be the Son of God (John 10:22–42), started teaching an entirely new definition of what true goodness was and is, saying things like

You have heard that it was said to those of old, “You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.” But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, “You fool!” will be liable to the hell of fire. (Matthew 5:21–22 ESV)

and

You have heard that it was said, “You shall not commit adultery.” But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. (Matthew 5:27–28 ESV)

All of a sudden, the playing field was leveled.

Goodness is not just what we do on the outside—it’s how we live on the inside. It turned out that the God of the universe gave a definition of *goodness* that none of us could possibly reach—one that suddenly made everyone a part of the problem, not just the nonreligious or Samaritans or conservatives or liberals . . . all of us.

The Real Truth

An endless number of TV shows are based around a host detailing and mocking all the ways people from other groups are messing up the world. Nonstop news programs have pundits who systematically lay the blame for the ills of the world in the laps of the opposing political party. Countless sermons preached by pastors claim that the desperate condition of the world is the fault of unbelievers. Scores of YouTube videos posted by atheists proclaim the evils

of religion. Innumerable podcasts are dedicated to picking apart both men and women in efforts to blame the other for their pain. An infinite supply of blogs, articles, and books scathingly critique whomever they deem at fault for the brokenness of the world. And we sit entranced by these voices as they subliminally assure us that *we* are good and *they* are not.

Even in our interpersonal relationships, we humans have an amazing ability to place blame on the “other.” We blame our spouses for our failing marriages, our parents for our disappointing lives, our children for our broken relationships, our bosses for our unhappiness, our employees for our mistakes, and so forth. There’s a comfort that comes from knowing that we’re not one of the bad people, that the fracture in the world and in our lives isn’t our fault, and that our hands are clean. But it’s a comfort that blinds us to the uncomfortable truth that really we are *all* responsible for the darkness that exists in the world.

The very first story involving humans in Scripture is of a man and woman, Adam and Eve, who were created in God’s own image and lived in paradise. But soon after being tempted by a serpent, they disobeyed God and ate a forbidden and deadly fruit. And what happened when Adam was caught? Did he realize the error of his ways, own up to his fault, and deal with the consequences? No. He instead looked for someone to blame—his wife. “It was the woman you gave me” (Genesis 3:12 NLT).

We are *all* responsible for the darkness that exists in the world.

Not much has changed in the few millennia since this story was written. We are a fallen people, each filled with the same selfishness, rage, and fracture as the person sitting across from us. But we have such a hard time admitting that. We long to be good. We each desire so deeply to be whole and beautiful. But we’re not.

None of us are. And we never were. In children we can see that the selfish and cruel tendencies in the human heart are there from the beginning. Children almost instinctively lie to cover up their mistakes, hit their classmates in anger, and greedily take the biggest cookie, displaying the broken behavior and proclivities that exist in each of us and live in the world now. Anyone with a toddler will tell you about the intrinsic sin nature in humans, even tiny ones.

The words in Scripture written thousands of years ago by an ancient psalmist and quoted by the apostle Paul are still startlingly accurate about the condition of the human heart today: “No one is righteous—not even one” (Romans 3:10 NLT).

And that truth is what hit me that night in my bedroom as a teenager: “I’m not good.” This realization hit me hard because I’d spent so much of my time examining other people and what they were doing wrong. I still do. I spend hours watching videos and scrolling through X, judging those I see as “the problem.” I spend days thinking about the ways my family, friends, or colleagues fail, all while I excuse and ignore the brokenness that lives in me and that I act out in the world. I do this until I suddenly find I can’t anymore because I am forced to look at my own choices.

In the coming pages, I’m going to explore this hard reality: The problem with the world isn’t just “them”; it’s also “us.” I want us to discover why we are so adept at pointing fingers at everyone but ourselves, how we can overcome it, and if there’s any hope for us and the world we live in.

· God looks down from heaven
· on the entire human race;
· he looks to see if anyone is truly wise,
· if anyone seeks God.
· But no, all have turned away;
· all have become corrupt.
· No one does good,
· not a single one!

(Psalm 53:2–3 NLT)