

From Good *to* Grace

Letting Go *of the* Goodness Gospel

Christine Hoover



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To my boys, Will, Reese, and Luke,
because my greatest desire is for each of you
to receive and enjoy God's grace
and to respond to him with your lives

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— *Part One* —

Good, Bye

Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made
perfect by the flesh?

Galatians 3:3

1

Obsessed with Goodness

AS I PULLED JEANS in various sizes from the dryer, sorting and stacking them into three neat piles representative of each of my boys, I estimated how many times I'd done this exact task in the previous twelve months. Perhaps 416 times? The number seemed low, quite honestly, because I felt in that moment as if I'd spent my entire life reaching into the dryer for one more pair of pants with holes in the knees or one more pair of superhero underwear. And what did it say about me that the most exciting purchase of the year, a purchase I effused over to anyone who would listen for months afterward, was a large-capacity washer and dryer? By my gleeful estimation, that purchase had cut my time standing at the washer and dryer by at least half.

My laundry calculations led to more: the number of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches made, meals slaved over, noses wiped,

toilets cleaned, grocery stores conquered, and birthday parties planned.

Final tally: a lot.

I had been busy in the past year, not just with our boys and their myriad of needs and activities but also with ministry activities outside our home. As a pastor's wife, my opportunities had been plentiful for discipleship, counseling, leading, hosting, and planning, and I'd happily taken advantage of each one.

Final tally: a lot, a lot.

In that moment, standing at the washer and dryer, I wasn't grumbling to myself, as if the gifts of family and ministry weren't a blessing, or as if these opportunities were just tasks to me. I simply had a salient moment where I sat with the whole of my life in front of me and questioned if all those numbers and tasks and activities and relationships added up to my life counting for something. Was God using my life to impact others in meaningful ways?

What I really found myself asking was this: *Am I a good Christian, wife, mom, and minister?* Because that's what I want more than anything else—for my life to mean something in the kingdom of God, to be good at these things.

But I'm just making sandwiches.

I'm just hosting one of our church's small groups.

I'm just writing blog posts as a means of trying to make sense of what God is teaching me.

I'm just sewing a button on a shirt for my husband and saying a prayer for him as he stands to preach on Sunday mornings.

I'm just listening to a friend pour out her heart and trying to say the words that will help.

I don't necessarily feel that I'm making a huge dent in this world in the name of Jesus. I don't feel particularly good at anything, except maybe making to-do lists and getting overwhelmed at the number of demands on that list.

And although I don't feel particularly good at anything, I want *desperately* to be good at the things that matter most to me.

I want to be a good wife to a husband who is infinitely good to me. When he has a need, I want to meet it kindly and graciously. When we disagree, I want to respond with gentleness and patience. I want him to enjoy our marriage and be glad he chose me for life. Too often, however, I'm indifferent, distracted, or offering him only my leftover energy and attention. I want to be a good wife—but what is a good wife, exactly, and how do I become one?

I also very much want to be a good mom. And if there is one thing I want to do well with my kids, it's rearing them to know God's voice and love his ways. But if there is one area I feel most inadequate in, it's rearing my children to know God's voice and love his ways, and every other little thing I'm trying to teach them under this larger umbrella, whether it's tying shoes or polite social interactions or how to share with one another.

I panic when I think of my children embarking into adulthood, typically because I imagine that they'll have to call me to come tie their shoes or they'll freeze to death because I'm not there to remind them to wear pants and coats in the winter. Or they'll spend every waking minute in front of a video game console because I'm not there to monitor their activities. Will they ever walk with the Lord? Will they become leaders in their homes and influencers in their communities? Will they love people well?

And then I remember that a man isn't built in a day, and to keep my eyes in the moment, to take small steps, to do the next thing. But even for the moment, I often feel powerless and overcome by the mountain in front of me. I feel like I should be better at this than I am. Or maybe it's that I feel like all these things should come easily to a "good mother," so I must not be one. I *want* to be one. However, what exactly is a good mother and how do I become one?

I also very much want to be a good friend to the women I spend my life with. I want to have an abundance of energy and time

and love to pour out on them. I want to remember their birthdays and give them delightful gifts and play fun games together while laughing boisterously late into the night. I want to let them see me cry and tell them when I need help rather than keeping it to myself because I don't want to be a burden. And I very much want them to feel free to cry on me and call on me. But the reality of it is that I am often in bed before nine, and I sometimes remember to get a birthday card, and I forget to follow up with friends on important conversations. I can be difficult to know. And I hurt people sometimes; I know I do. Despite it all, I want to be a good friend, but what exactly is a good friend and how do I become one?

I am so impatient with myself, so hard on myself, so quick to throw my hands up in frustration or surrender. I find myself thinking that God feels that same way toward me: impatient that I'm not further along, frustrated that I fail, irritated by my faithless worrying. Those thoughts reveal that I often perceive God as huffing at my weaknesses, wishing I could get it together already, arms crossed and foot tapping.

And this is, in fact, where I feel the most weight in my heart because, most of all, I want to please God. I want to be a good Christian. I desperately want to be good at the things that matter most to him. I want to be good at what he wants me to be good at and give myself to the things he wants me to give myself to. *And just what is that exactly?*

I Thought Life Would Be Glamorous

Maybe I overanalyze these things. Or maybe I'm making life harder than it's supposed to be. Either way, as I'm approaching middle age, I evaluate my life and the way I'm living it way more than I did when I was younger. I used to think about other things.

As I hoisted the laundry basket full of clean, folded clothes onto my hip, I thought about my younger self and the dreams I'd had for my life. In those days, I envisioned being a good Christian and living an impactful life would look a bit different than four-hundred-plus loads of laundry a year or stopping on the street to chat with a neighbor or preparing a simple meal for a new mom. An impactful life involved teaching a large Bible study, going places, or being known and admired by crowds of people, or . . . I don't know really what it is that I thought would make it all count for God. Something dramatic. Something glamorous. Something spectacular.

In college, I attended the first-ever Passion conference in Austin, Texas, with several thousand other students. The whole thing was life-changing in many ways, full of mind-searing moments. One such moment: Louie Giglio, exhorting us to be a generation that would live for God's renown, asked us to stand if we might be willing to die for Christ, to literally give our lives for him. I stood with others, agreeing that I would. And I meant it. I stood because I desperately wanted to be a good Christian and do big things for God, and I imagined that physical death on behalf of Christ was about the biggest thing I could possibly do for him. A moment of standing publicly for Jesus definitely fit the dramatic and spectacular mold.

It wasn't difficult to stand, however, because martyrdom was a lofty ideal for me; I doubted I would ever be asked to make good on that promise. However, I mentally made a list of additional "big things" I might consider in case the martyrdom thing didn't materialize: becoming a missionary or remaining single so I could serve Christ with an undivided focus. That was about all I could come up with, but, nonetheless, I assented in my heart to living a big life for God.

That's what I thought about as I put the laundry away: I had assumed that living life for God and being a good Christian would be a big, splashy to-do. In reality, I'm still waiting for God to ask

me to do something “big.” I am no longer single, but I sort of became a missionary when my husband and I parachute-dropped into a new city and started a church. I say “sort of” because I’m still living what feels like an average life of laundry, PTO, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, superhero underwear, and church and community ministry. My view of the world-impacting person I would be as an adult involved a great deal more energy and discretionary time than I currently have, and now that I think about it, my future life involved comfort, ease, and plenty of applause too. My future self was really confident, was an excellent public speaker, was revered in the community, had the Bible memorized, and lived in a Pottery Barn–themed house. But in my current everyday life, I don’t always feel like I’m getting it right. I don’t walk around feeling super confident that I’m making a huge imprint on the world or anything. People don’t part like the Red Sea when I walk around town, unless, of course, they are trying to avoid me because they know I’m the pastor’s wife and that might make things a little awkward.

I’m ordinary.

My life doesn’t look like what I imagined as an idealistic college student. I see weakness and failure in myself. I’m less confident than I was in college and, somehow, I know so much less than I did then. I’ve experienced wounds and dark days that I thought might incapacitate me once and for all. I’m tired a lot and don’t love people like I should. I feel overwhelmed in parenting sometimes and I don’t always feel like I’m a good pastor’s wife or good just plain wife. My work is typing words on a page to encourage and help others, but most of the time it feels like I’m just processing a jumble of thoughts and emotions by spewing them out on paper. And then there are all the rote routines and inconsequential days, bills to pay, and deadlines to meet. How could I possibly be making an impact in the name of Christ when I’m not particularly fabulous at anything? Am I resigned to a minor part in God’s story, or is

this everyday life of small moments somehow adding up to a life that matters?

The State We're In

I know I'm not alone in this quiet desperation, because everywhere I turn I meet and engage with women who want to be good Christians and who want their lives to count for the kingdom of God, but they are often confused about how to do that and doubtful it will ever be a reality, because they're mostly weighed down with doubts and grief and life's unmet expectations. They are standing at the dryer, sitting at a desk, volunteering at church, cracking open their Bibles, or serving family or roommates in seemingly unseen ways, yet still waiting eagerly for the day when God asks them to do big things in his name or when they finally feel good enough to be used by him at all. The women I talk to are just like me, stumbling through singleness or marriage or careers or parenting, trying so hard to be good at it all.

Didn't Jesus talk about joy and purposefulness and the abundant life? There seems to be a great disconnect between the message of Jesus and our everyday lives.

In some ways, I believe this is because we can't often figure out what it is that God wants from us, or perhaps it's that we don't even think to ask him or to listen intently for his answer. So we go on doing what we think we *ought* to do, or what everyone else around us is doing. We create strategies, make to-do lists, choose activities, and organize ourselves within an inch of our lives based upon what we see online or what influential people tell us we should be doing. We're striving with everything in us toward goodness, toward making an impact, driven by the expectation of what our lives *should* look like.

Our ideas of pleasing God involve being good at everything, never having weaknesses or mess-ups, having every skill and gift,

and keeping the religious plates spinning at all times. If we are good, we surmise, we'll be loved, we'll make a significant impact in the world, and God will be honored. And then we look around for results and ripples as evidence of how "good" we are and, tellingly, these evidences are usually external: well-behaved children, an adoring husband or a line of suitors, the admiration of other women, a job we love, a Pinterest-worthy home, a set of fun friends, and a comfortable life. In this paradigm, comparison and competition abound, and success is externally measured and only for a few. We are obsessed with goodness, and our addiction to it is growing in the age of the internet, where we can compare our goodness with others or add more to our "to-do" goodness list. But, if we're honest, when we live in this paradigm none of us really feel like we're doing enough.

The state we're in was on full display at a women's conference I attended recently. Just as the speaker took her place at the podium, the woman next to me slid her book across the table, offering me a quick peek inside. She said I could have it for free if I would promote it on my blog, so I politely flipped through the pages, glanced at the back cover, and set it on the table as I turned my attention to the stage. I became engrossed in the speaker's story, furiously writing down her hard-won wisdom, but to my left, the woman who had passed me her book pulled out her cell phone and began scrolling through her Facebook and Twitter feeds. I casually inched her book back to her side of the table, certain I would not read it or promote it because of *her*.

I did not know this woman and I may very well have completely misread her, but no matter because in that moment, that woman—seemingly so intent on promoting herself, so self-focused, so image-driven—raised a full-length mirror to my own heart. I was gripped by it, so sure of what I was seeing. She reflected back to me my own dark desires of instant success, popularity, and influence. I saw a clamorer, dissatisfied, concerned with worldly success more than

character, concerned with making a self-determined big splash for Jesus but wanting desperately to bypass daily faithfulness and dependence.

In the mirror, I saw wickedness.

I ran, ashamed, considering the core of the matter, the lies that weave their way into my life:

What I'm doing is not enough.

What I have is not enough.

I am not enough.

I am concerned about the state of my heart that gets so easily caught up in the online frenzy of self-promotion and image-keeping, or that gets wrapped in knots when conversations among women turn to their choices that have not been my own. I am concerned about all of us, that we are pining after, and comparing, and envying ourselves away. We are clamoring to stake out our place in the world, to be noticed or seen or loved or respected. We are so worried about being good we're losing our souls in the process.

In Christian culture, women feel great confusion and even pressure about what we should be doing and why we should be doing it. This confusion touches decisions about education, family, eating and drinking, work, hobbies, community involvement, and even whether one should volunteer when the sign-up sheet is passed around again at church. The pressure grows when choices are wrapped in spiritual or more-spiritual terms. We see it everywhere: Do something great! Follow your dreams! Make a difference for the kingdom! Be missional and in community! For the gospel-confused, that too often translates into: I'm not doing enough, what I'm doing isn't making a difference, and I've got to create my own and my neighbor's own and my children's own and everyone's own life transformation.

As a result, the Christian women I talk to feel distant from God, experience self-doubt, constantly compare themselves with other women, live hurried and overextended lives, and wonder desperately if they are “good” Christians who please God. I’ve been that woman, and I’m fighting not to be that woman now.

When I open my Bible and read the truth it offers, I don’t see a correlation between this frantic pursuit of good and the way Jesus talked. He never patted anyone on the head and said, “What a good person you are. I’m so proud of you!” But isn’t that what we’re chasing, the “atta-girl” from Jesus? Might I be hard pressed to find people who claim Jesus who are living the abundant, light-yoked life he promised them? Do *I* live that way? And why are we not asking these questions?

When is enough, enough? When do we stop the self-made plans, the flow of information, the swirling thoughts, and the self-condemnation to ask the simple question, “What is it that *God* wants from us?”

As I put the superhero underwear away, stack by stack, I saw it. I know what *I* want for me: I want to be good. No, I’m *obsessed* with being good. I’m obsessed with external, circumstantial results that prove once and for all that I’m a good wife, mom, friend, and Christian. I’m creating a certain image of myself and doing things that *I* consider noteworthy. My concerns are self-focused concerns, not God-focused concerns. I am not living according to the very gospel that I claim.

And here I thought I was done with all that.

The Goodness Gospel

This is where I tell you my story, and this is mostly what you need to know to understand my story: I’ve been obsessed with being good and performing all my life.

Hello, my name is Christine. I'm a goodness addict.

I was born with a list in my hand, or at least that's how early I imagine it started. I came by it honestly—my mom's response to everything my sister and I needed as children, whether shampoo from the store or help with a school project, was always, "Make a list!"

So I did. I made list after list—of library books for summer reading, of boys that I liked, of songs to record from the radio on my tape recorder, of necessities to pack for overnight camp, of must-haves in my future husband, even of outfits for the first month of eighth grade so as not to repeat and make a fashion faux pas of infinite proportion.

I don't just make lists. I am *that* person, the one who adds a task to a list just to experience the satisfaction of crossing it off, the one who makes lists for my lists.

I'm a perfectionist.

There was a time when I would have said that with pride, but not anymore. Perfectionism has not been a friend to me. Sure, my house is organized and my budget spreadsheet is up-to-date, but when perfectionism is applied to the spiritual needs of the heart, it's called legalism. And *legalism* is a fancy word for an obsession with goodness. It's a belief that good things come from God to those who are good. And it's a belief that you can actually be good enough to get to God on your own.

I became a Christian at age eight. From that point, or more accurately from the point in middle school when I started having "quiet times" according to my youth minister's instructions, until my late twenties, I spent the majority of my Christian life striving—striving for perfection, for God's favor, for the approval of others, and for the joy and freedom that the Bible spoke of yet completely eluded me.

It seemed to me that an endless to-do list had been delivered first-class to my doorstep the second I said the sinner's prayer.

And as I've already admitted, I'm pretty good at lists—or lists are pretty good at controlling me, one of the two. After I had been a Christian for a few years, God's to-do list, or at least the list I perceived him to have, kept growing like an unstoppable cancer not responding to treatment. "Read the Bible" became "Read the Bible every day," and then "Read the Bible every day for thirty minutes before school or else God is mad at you and Kirby will sneeze a snot rocket into the back of your hair again in geometry." I just knew if I could check off every item on the to-do list, I would be the model Christian and God would pat me on the back, winking like jolly old Santa Claus as he whispered, "I'm so glad you're on my team." Most importantly, my attempts at perfection would make him love me.

At an early age, I fell for perfectionism's lie that I could be good enough to win God's heart and the approval of others. I sought joy, peace, and love through being good, and instead found myself miserably enslaved to my own unattainable standards.

This was my understanding of what it meant to be a Christian: If I do good things, then God is pleased. If I do things wrong, then he is angry. This is actually the basis of every religion on earth *except* Christianity, this idea of a scale where the good must outweigh the bad in order to be right with God. I had religion down pat, but the religion I practiced wasn't true and biblical Christianity. On the outside I appeared to be a good Christian, but on the inside I felt unlovable and was riddled with guilt about my inability to please God.

Unfortunately for me, a large part of a goodness obsession is an addiction to self. Goodness is evaluated by activity, completed tasks, responses from others, and results. It requires a focus on appearance and image and maintaining some semblance of religious behavior. Goodness required that I control my environment with military precision, hide my weaknesses, and compare myself with others or my own arbitrary standards. Goodness fed both my pride and my self-condemnation and kept me relationally isolated.

The other part of a goodness addiction, I discovered in my twenties, is a faulty understanding of who God is and what he expects from his children. I only saw God through perfectionism's filter. He was gray. He had no patience for my mistakes, forever glaring at me with a scowl on his face. He sighed a lot. If I was extra good, he *might* manage to crack a smile. He was one-dimensional, disengaged, and unaffectionate, and I absolutely feared him.

I knew nothing about grace.

I knew nothing about forgiveness.

I knew nothing about the true gospel, because a goodness addiction completely overtakes the heart and mind, leaving no room for truth. It enslaves and cannibalizes itself. It becomes an all-encompassing religion, closing tightly around one's soul. It led me down paths of depression and despair.

And it became my gospel.

The True Gospel

I lived according to the goodness gospel for far too long.

But God pursued me. He used multiple people to reveal my goodness addiction and to show me both his true nature and the truth of what he had done for me at the cross, but he used my husband most of all.

About a year into our marriage, Kyle and I got into a life-changing fight. Can a fight be one-sided? Because that's what it was. I snapped at him about something trivial, and instead of snapping back, he just calmly left the room. I was being a crazy person and he knew it. As soon as he left, I felt ashamed. Why had I gotten so angry about something of such small consequence? Why would I choose to hurt my husband like that? With my tail between my legs, I went to him.

"I'm sorry," I said, pleading with my eyes for him to release me of what I'd done.

“I forgive you,” he said, and he meant it. He actually smiled as he said it.

That’s it? I thought. No penance required, no pouting, no silent treatment, no dumping on of shame, nothing? *It’s just forgiven that easily?*

My eyes must have revealed my uncertainty because he reached out for my hand and pulled me to his lap. Then he wrapped his arms around me, looked me in the eyes, and reiterated, “I forgive you. I love you, Christine.”

As we embraced, the Lord whispered to my heart, the heart deaf to true forgiveness and grace, *This is exactly how I love you. I don’t keep a record of wrongs or hold your sin over your head. When you confess something to Me, I forgive you. I delight in you.*

At this point in our marriage and ministry, God, through the book of Galatians, had begun showing me how little I truly understood of the gospel. Instead of the true gospel, I was living by what Paul called the “perverted” gospel, one of works and dead religion. My heart and mind were starting to wake up to the truth because my husband had become a pastor, and our new ministry life was shining a very bright light on my self-sufficiency and attempts at self-justification. I discovered quickly that I could not meet ministry’s demands—and I certainly could not love—according to bootstrap religion.

The beacon of light, simultaneously convicting and life-giving, was Galatians 5:4: “You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law.” That is exactly how I felt—like an outsider standing apart from Christ, nose plastered to the glass, trying desperately to earn my belonging. At the same time, I rejected any of Christ’s advances toward me out of shame over my failures and out of my stubborn self-determination.

This passage described how I’d felt most of my Christian life: entangled, weighed down under a heavy yoke, in bondage, in debt, and, most of all, as if I were estranged from Christ. It also showed

me *why* I felt that way: my obsession with goodness had nullified Christ's work in my life. Because I hadn't gone his way, I was on my own.

But he eventually got to me. He showed me that I sat in a jail cell with an open door but kept putting the chains back on myself instead of running free. He walked alongside me as I discovered the futility of trying to be good by myself, and he offered to rescue me, showing me what measure of grace he had already given me at the cross and at the moment I believed. But his way, as he revealed to me in Galatians, was nothing like my way. I could go my way and be forever frustrated at my never-ending debt, or I could accept his way of grace and faith and Spirit.

In time I realized that he loved me, not because of what I did but because of what he did through Christ on the cross. I finally ran wildly to his grace-filled arms, done with my chains. What had always felt like duty and obligation now felt like crazy freedom.

Grace for Every Day

As I shut the dresser drawer, finished with laundry for a few blessed days, I remembered what that freedom felt like. I remembered the feeling of my heart coming alive to his love, and how I had greedily received it and had wanted to give it away so generously.

The gospel regarding my salvation had been so clear.

But something had happened along the way.

The goodness gospel had silently and covertly wormed its way in again, bringing confusion, tripping me up. I found myself, once again, in Galatians, and it shone a light into the state of my heart: "Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?" (Gal. 3:3).

My goodness obsession was flaring up again, evidenced by my concerns about being good enough for God or for other people. I

recognized that I'd understood what the gospel meant for salvation, but clearly I was still grasping what it meant for my everyday life. I realized that if I was not diligent and on guard, my goodness obsession would continue morphing and infecting new and different areas of my life. I thought about how it had affected me in ministry, how I'd wrestled with what it meant to be a good pastor's wife, and how I'd had to put my goodness obsession to death in that area by learning to rely on the Holy Spirit's power. I thought about how having our first child had sent me into a tailspin of comparison and feelings of failure and how I'd had to continually brawl with my obsession, pinning my need to control down to the ground. And I thought about my writing and how I'd grappled with the wickedest of feelings and motivations and how I'd had to learn to write by faith rather than for my own glory or by my own skill.

There, in my boys' bedroom, I prayed.

God, help me see how your gospel is meant to saturate my life. Show me what you want from me in my everyday life.

He immediately reminded me of 2 Corinthians 12:9: "My strength is made perfect in weakness." I suppose he knows, then, that I am weak and isn't expecting me to be strong. I suppose, then, I cannot manage my life. Considering my mothering, I suppose I cannot control or change my children, and I cannot work hard enough to produce men of valor. *I am weak. I have no authority to change the hearts of my children.*

But he didn't stop there. He reminded me of Paul's words in the next verse: "For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:10).

This is so what I want: to know deep in my soul that a good mother is not one who bakes intricate treats, who schools a certain way, who manages her household within an inch of its life, or who has her children in a million wonderful activities. A good mother is one who acknowledges her need for the power of God to train and teach and change the hearts of her children.

This is also what I want to know about being a wife, church member, community volunteer, and every other role I play—that the most important thing I can do each day is *not* to be good or rely on myself but to trust God and acknowledge my weakness. He will take my meager offering and turn it into a miracle. This is what I need to know down deep in my soul: how Christ’s gospel of grace is for every single day.

And isn’t this what we all need to know? Don’t we all need to be free from the rubbish of our goodness obsession, to stop thinking of ourselves and discover what God wants from us? Don’t we all need to know what it means to wake up every day and walk by faith, live in grace, and walk in the Spirit rather than stubbornly or ignorantly reverting back to external rituals, striving, and self-sufficiency? Don’t we all need to awaken to the reality of the new creation God is making us deep in the unseen places? Don’t we all need to allow him to take us to his heart and remove once and for all the chains we continue to put on ourselves?

Perhaps that’s it exactly: we not only need to know what God wants *from* us, we also need to know what he wants *for* us.