

When goodness is also lovely

The New Testament has two words for “good.” Knowing the difference between them can help us build a better society.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [August 25, 2021](#) issue



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When Primo Levi wrote about being an Auschwitz survivor, his thoughts went directly to the man who smuggled soup and bread to him every day. “I am alive today, not so much because of [Lorenzo’s] material aid, as for his having constantly reminded me by his presence, by his plain and gentle manner of being good, that there still existed a just world outside our own, something and someone still pure and whole.” Levi regularly pointed to two kinds of goodness that made his survival in Auschwitz possible. One was the food that allowed him to eke out an existence. The other was the warm and gentle spirit of Lorenzo.

In Greek, there are two words for *good*. *Agathos* defines the quality of something that is good in character, beneficial in effect, or useful in action. Edible bread and soup, for example, have goodness that’s precious to a hungry body. *Kalos* describes

something that's not only good in quality but also has an attractive or captivating character. Lorenzo's humility in sharing from his own meager provisions struck Primo Levi as lovely. *Kalos* is the word reserved for something or someone that expresses goodness in a winsome or beautiful way.

Agathos and *kalos* each appear 102 times in the New Testament, with each of them showing up in 91 separate verses. It's *kalos*, however, that has my attention when it comes to trying to build a society where people want to be more than doggedly correct all the time. People who feel a strong need to be scrupulously right on all manner of things often end up repelling more than attracting others. Their rightness may come with harshness, unloveliness, an absence of warmth. But when the moral goodness of a person gets shared with others in inviting and winsome ways, the person's company becomes that much more desirable.

Kalos is an aesthetic good, a compelling way of being that winsomely draws people into the beauty of a better life. "You may be able to compel people to maintain certain minimum standards by stressing duty," wrote Reinhold Niebuhr. "But the highest moral and spiritual achievements depend not upon a push but upon a pull. People must be charmed into righteousness." That's Niebuhr's way of suggesting that personalities deserve to have attractive dimensions, lovely aspects that affect others in positive ways.

"Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good [*kalos*] works, and glorify your Father in heaven," says Jesus. He isn't just preaching about doing good with one's life; Jesus is admonishing people to work out their impact on others in delightful and winsome ways. "I am the good [*kalos*] shepherd," he says elsewhere—a reminder that shepherding for him is more than some technical skill. It's caring for people in lovely and compelling ways. When a woman pours costly ointment on Jesus' head and critics step up to call it wasteful behavior, Jesus says to them, "Let her alone; she has performed a good [*kalos*] service for me." It's not expensive ointment that makes the moment beautiful. Something in the woman's character or action is what Jesus finds lovely.

Doing good things for others is nothing short of wonderful. But striving to do those same things in lovely or winsome ways is what keeps the world in step with the rhythm with God.

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