

THE TRUTH ABOUT US

The Very Good News
about How Very Bad We Are

BRANT HANSEN



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To Darin Hansen.
Thank you for always looking out
for your strange little brother.

It is better to live naked in truth than clothed in fantasy.

—Brennan Manning

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ONE

Dear Everybody

An Introduction to Our Biggest Problem

All have turned away, all have become corrupt;
there is no one who does good,
not even one.

—Psalm 14:3

Dear Everybody,

We have a serious problem:
All of us think we're good people.
But Jesus says we're not.

Sincerely,
Brant P. Hansen

PS: The rest of this book is the PS.

IF YOU THINK I'M WRONG—about how we think we're good people—I offer this challenge: Go ahead and ask someone. Seriously, if you're reading this at a coffee shop, ask the stranger sitting at the next table, “So, are you a good person? Would you say you're more moral than the average person?”

Given my studies in this area, I can predict their response with 98 percent confidence, and it's “I'm calling the police.” But while the authorities are being dispatched, try to get a serious answer. If they give you their honest take, you'll hear something like, “Why, yes, I do think I'm more moral than the average person.”

This is predictable because social scientists have asked these questions for decades, and the result is the same: *We all think we're more moral than average*. It's remarkable how good we are. Just ask us, and we'll tell you about it.

We can fool ourselves about a lot of things. (For instance, I persist in believing I'll be able to eventually dunk a basketball, despite the fact that my vertical jump is decreasing and I'm actually getting shorter.) But of all the things we delude ourselves about, our moral “goodness” is our biggest self-deception.

Researchers at the University of London concluded that “a substantial majority of individuals believe themselves to be morally superior to the average person” and that this illusion of ours is “uniquely strong and prevalent.” They write, “Most people strongly believe they are just, virtuous, and moral; yet regard the average person as distinctly less so.” And among their study participants, “virtually all individuals irrationally inflated their moral qualities, and the absolute and relative magnitude of this irrationality was greater than that in the other domains of positive self-evaluation.”¹

And we have a lot of self-delusions. Perhaps you've heard that 93 percent of us genuinely believe we're above-average drivers. Perhaps you've seen studies that show we also think we're smarter than average. And we're friendlier too. Plus we're more ambitious than average.

You might think with all of this awesomeness, we might have an ego problem, but good news: we also rate ourselves as more modest than others!²

So, yes, we're better at everything than everybody, but at least we're humble about it. That's not surprising because we're us, and, you know, we're cool like that. But what about people we assume simply *must* be less moral than us? Murderers, thieves, and the like—surely they'd have a more reasonable assessment, right?

Why, no, actually. The incarcerated population also thinks they're more moral than everyone else. Prisoners find themselves to be kinder than the average person. And more generous.

The professor who conducted the study of prisoners wrote, “The results showcase how potent the self-enhancement motive is. It is very important for people to consider themselves good, valued, and esteemed, no matter what objective circumstances might be.”³

Our goodness is our biggest self-delusion, and all of us seem to be living with it. It's a delusion we seldom talk about, but Jesus is relentless in addressing it in myriad ways. He publicly blasts upstanding citizens for being clean on the outside but not the inside. He tells stories like those of the prodigal son to illustrate how a seemingly good person can be utterly lost without knowing it. He tells the chief priests that prostitutes will enter the kingdom before they do. He tells an apparently

The impression I get from Jesus is that the battle against our own self-righteousness is our biggest battle of all.

law-keeping “good guy” that no one but God is good. Jesus keeps emphasizing that all of us, without exception, need to repent and repudiate ourselves.

In fact, the impression I get from Jesus is that the battle against our own self-righteousness is our biggest battle of all.

With this in mind, here are a few things to consider as you read this book:

- 1. This will be challenging, and possibly strange. But it’ll also be fun. It will be strangely fun.**

The truth about *The Truth about Us* is that it’s about *all* of us. You’re not being singled out. You don’t need to feel guilty for being a human being. And you know what? Learning about how we all operate can be fascinating and even amusing.

Roughly speaking, that’s what the first half of the book is about. Then we’ll more fully discuss what we can do—and give up doing—to make a refreshing difference in how we see the world and operate in it.

- 2. You’ll gain insight into your own behavior and thoughts and into how others work too.**

This can mean gaining the peace and freedom that comes from growing up, from refusing to play the same tiring mental games our entire lives in order to justify ourselves. The burden gets lighter.

- 3. This is written by someone who thinks Jesus is an authority.**

I don't mean just "an authority" either, but The Authority. Jesus is at the center of my view of the world. If you're not a Christian, I think you'll still enjoy this book and even find yourself nodding in agreement at times.

4. This isn't written textbook-style.

While I'd like these concepts to be taken seriously, I'll be writing in a conversational style. This is because (a) I tried to make this book all academic-y, but (b) I bored myself into a stupor. So I started over.

5. We're not only going to talk about the truth about ourselves. We're also going to talk about what to do about it.

The goal here is not for you to walk away thinking, *Wow, Brant. Now I see how self-righteous I am. Thank you. I feel tingly all over.* No, the goal is to lighten your load, and to help you see just how good God is and how much more relaxing life can be when we come to terms with who we are. The same Jesus who keeps trying to show us how we're not as good as we think we are is the one promising that his way is lighter and easier.

Another goal is to sell twelve million copies of this book, launching a nine-episode film series starring Viggo Mortensen as me. So there are a couple goals here.

Plus *The Truth about Us* action figures. So that's three goals now, I guess.

Anyway, the point is, I hope you read this book and are inspired.

6. When we discuss "self-righteousness," here's what I mean.

Biblically, the word *righteous* means approved by God. It's something God judges as good or right. To

be self-righteous, then, simply means we've met that standard in our own eyes. As we'll see, this is very, very important to us and, I believe, animates so much of what we actually do in life.

Jesus warns us against our self-righteousness in the most dire terms. (He uses the word *hell* a lot more often than most of us are comfortable with.) He's quite aware that while we humans have seemingly insatiable, unstoppable lusts for everything—fame, money, sex, power, tickets to *Hamilton*, pumpkin-spice products—it's actually our pride that will doom us.

In this book, I'll show you how we will often stop at nothing to avoid cognitive dissonance. We will twist logic, bend reason, conveniently forget facts, invent new stories, even destroy relationships—all in the name of preserving our precious illusion. We'll sacrifice anything. It really is that important to us. This is how addictions work, and when it comes to our own need to be “right,” well, we're all addicts who need to be set free.

A warning: It's true that observing how we humans really operate is a little unsettling. But let's also admit it's entertaining too—kind of like that Super Bowl halftime show with the Rolling Stones when Mick Jagger was flapping his arms around. Sure, we were mildly disturbed and we're all still processing it, but we're going to be okay. We went through it together.

The “At Least I Don't . . .” Delusion

Jesus keeps trying, over and over, to get us past our favorite delusion. In Scripture, one of his favorite ways of getting around our defenses is telling brilliant short stories. He uses

the following story to put his listeners (and us) on notice: “Good people” often kid themselves.

To some *who were confident of their own righteousness* and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’

“But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’

“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Luke 18:9–14 (italics mine)

The hero of the story is the man who knows he’s not a good person. He doesn’t equivocate in the least. He offers zero excuses. He compares himself to no one. He doesn’t offer an “At least I don’t . . .,” as in “At least I don’t murder people,” or “At least I’m not racist,” or “At least I’m not lazy.” He refuses to even try to justify himself.

Jesus promises people like that will be lifted up.

Notice what he promises for the outwardly good guy who offers the prayer with “At least I don’t . . .” at the heart of it: He’s going to be brought down, hard.

I've learned that Jesus is both terribly dangerous and terribly safe. For the proud, he is the biggest threat imaginable. And for the humble, he is the securest refuge.

And then we have Jesus, just a few verses later, nailing the point to our front door, in case we missed it:

A certain ruler asked him, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

"Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "*No one is good—except God alone.*"

Luke 18:18–19 (italics mine, but I bet Jesus wanted it italicized)

This is very hard for us to accept. "I'm not a good person" is a shockingly countercultural thing to say. We all want to think we're "clean" and that we've avoided whatever "big sins" are on our own personal lists. But we trust ourselves too much. We are inconsistent. We don't even live up to our own stated beliefs. (Just think about all the things you've faulted others for. Have you always lived up to those standards yourself?)

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Here's something we perhaps don't think about much that demonstrates that we're truly not good like God is good: *We fail spectacularly to love like he does.* Honestly, do we really love people well? Everyone? Consistently? Or is it truer that we actually fail at this practically every hour of every day?

God is love. He is good. He is the standard. We're good too, if we love like he does. Do we really believe we're anywhere close to that?

While Jesus tells us that no one is good but God, he then does something we still struggle to understand: He demonstrates vividly on a cross that our value doesn't depend on our goodness at all.

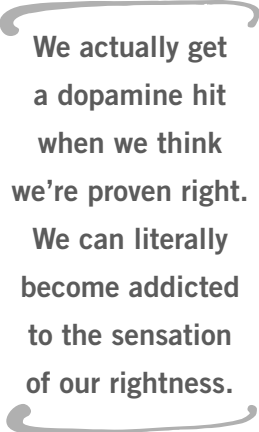
The Weirdest Thing to Say

It almost sounds crazy: "Hello. My name is Brant, and I am not a good person."

Not only is it countercultural, it even runs counter to our physiology. Studies show we actually get a dopamine hit when we think we're proven right. We can literally become addicted to the sensation of our rightness. "Your body does not discriminate against pleasure," writes clinical psychologist Renee Carr. "It can become addicted to any activity or substance that consistently produces dopamine."⁴

This might explain why we spend time scrolling through and enjoying information and news links that prove—once again—how right we are. Wow, do we love that feeling. It also might explain why many have gone to their graves insisting they were right, even if it made them miserable in the process. Addictions work that way.

W. H. Auden was right: "We'd rather be ruined than changed."⁵



We actually get a dopamine hit when we think we're proven right. We can literally become addicted to the sensation of our rightness.

Jesus insists on this willingness to change, because he knows that self-righteousness will separate us from God forever. We're all at high risk of becoming sick with self-righteousness, and if we don't submit to his healing, it's terminal.

Listen to Jesus and it sounds like he's doing an intervention, except instead of a group of people surrounding an unbelieving addict, it's the crowd that needs to get the message, and just one man is delivering it.

“Interventions” like that historically haven't ended well for the message bearer. Calling out our self-righteousness isn't popular, and believe me, this isn't lost on me as I'm writing. (Note to self: Next time, use a pen name. Pick something cooler than “Brant Hansen.”)

FAQ: But, Brant, don't you think that the author of a book on self-righteousness can be self-righteous himself?

A: YES. A thousand times, yes. This is a daily struggle for me.

It so happens I'm dealing with a bit of it right now as I type. Seriously. I'm currently sitting outside a restaurant on a pretty day. A Lexus SUV is to my left, parked in a spot that has a sign in front of it. The sign says that only people with a permit for disabilities can park there. The man who parked there does not have said permit. A lady in the spot next to him called his attention to the sign. He looked at it, shrugged, and walked off. I am morally superior to him.

I like to call this “righteous indignation” because he's clearly wrong, but if I'm being honest, it's not just

indignation. It's tastier than that. I kind of enjoy it. There's a sweetness in noticing the flaws in others, and—oh wait, here comes the guy. He's finally leaving. I was hoping he'd get a ticket, but he didn't. It would have felt great to see him get his comeuppance.

I don't park in handicapped spots. Me? I break other laws. Like the speed limit. But at least I don't do the thing that guy just did. (I'm kind of a Jedi master with the "At least I don't . . ." thing.)

So, yes, I'm as self-righteous by nature as you are. Like Steve Brown writes, "It is difficult (maybe impossible) to write about self-righteousness without being self-righteous."⁶ I'm not exempting myself from any of this. Imagine this book is like an AA meeting and I'm the guy standing next to you, pouring myself a Styrofoam cup of substandard coffee. There's no finger pointing. This is why the book is called *The Truth about Us* instead of *The Truth about All YOU Guys*.

It's helpful to know what's driving us. And in this book, I want us to consider the possibility that our lives are largely shaped by this desire to convince ourselves that we're good people.

This is what it means to be human and broken. Pull up a folding chair next to me, or maybe next to a thief who is world-renowned for doing nothing impressive whatsoever, except realizing he had done nothing impressive whatsoever. But he admitted the truth about himself and the truth about Jesus: *I'm a sinner, and he's the King*. We know about him because he's the first person—and the only person in recorded history—to whom Jesus says, "Today you will be with me in paradise."