

GOODNESS

SERIES: FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT



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Galatians 5:22-23
Seventh Message
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Galatians 5:22-23

“Good morning.”

We say this to each other all the time. But what do we mean by saying “Good morning”? Am I saying that this morning is good? Am I saying that I want you to have a good morning? Maybe I am saying that I feel good this morning.

Let’s say that what I mean is I am hoping for you that your morning will be good. What do I even mean by that? What makes a morning good? Coffee? Sunshine? Plenty of sleep? An insightful sermon? Kind words from a friend? “Good” is a word we use all the time, but stop and think for a moment.

What does it mean to be good? Are we talking about ethics? Beauty? Impact on the world? Usefulness? Morality?

This morning we are continuing our series on the fruit of the Spirit. We have been spending all summer in a single verse from the book of Galatians. This verse describes nine aspects of what is called the fruit of the Spirit. We started by seeing how the Galatians author says these things happen in the life of a Jesus follower when they “walk by the Spirit.”

Here are the verses that we have been focusing on in Galatians:

Galatians 5:22-23:

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

Remember that the fruit of the Spirit is not something we aim for. It is not something by which we judge ourselves. It is not something we can make happen. The fruit of the Spirit is the natural result of a life lived walking by the Spirit.

Today we’re looking at the sixth word: goodness. The apostle Paul claims that when you walk by the Spirit, one of the things that naturally results in your life is goodness. What does he mean by that?

A little over twenty years ago, Jim Collins published a book that would become a classic on corporate leadership. He titled it *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Other’s Don’t*. The title of this book is important for two reasons. First of all, this is how many of us think about goodness. It is a lesser form of greatness. We think about a spectrum that starts with “bad,” moves on to “okay”, passes through “good,” and ends with “great.”

Secondly, we receive constant messages not to be satisfied with goodness. We want to be great. Goodness is not enough. We desperately want to move past goodness and onto greatness. We want to change the world, build the next thing, and start the next Google.

The truth is that many of us are being crushed by the weight of the demand for greatness. We are tired, overwhelmed, frustrated and disappointed in ourselves. My hope this morning is to refresh us with a simple truth. God doesn’t demand greatness. Instead, he grows the deep-seated, peaceful, all-encompassing fruit of goodness within our lives.

The biblical picture of goodness is exquisite. The first value statement comes in Genesis 1:4 when we hear that “God saw that the light was good.” Soon after, we hear about a tree that grants the knowledge of both good and evil. Goodness runs like a thread through the Old Testament. When Jesus starts preaching, he has a lot to say about what and who is good.

The question we will focus on this morning is what we’ve been asking throughout this whole series. How does walking by the Spirit cause us to produce goodness as a fruit?

We will consider three ideas to answer that question. First, goodness does not happen naturally. I am not inclined to produce goodness. Second, there is

something unique about who God is and what he does in the world. We have to understand the relationship between God and goodness. Finally, when we put those things together, we will see how it is because of God in our lives that you and I are able to produce the fruit of goodness.

My hope is that we will be freed from the overwhelming burden of achieving greatness and begin to recognize the beautiful fruit of goodness that grows out of walking by the Spirit.

Let's begin.

We are not good

If you were to walk up to the average person and ask them, "do you want to be a good person?" what do you think they would say? I suspect that most people would say "yes."

What if you then asked them, "are you a good person?" what would they say to that? I suspect that most people would say something like "most of the time." They might even claim to be "pretty good."

In May 2021, a survey collected information from 2000 U.S. residents. Eighty-one percent said that humanity is inherently good. Seventy-five percent said that they were fundamentally good. Forty-six percent said that they were better people than everyone else they know.¹

We want to be good people. We want to think of ourselves as good people. We want to think of other people as good people. We want to think of the world as full of good people.

Look around. A world full of good people would not have the problems that we have. A world full of good people would not have racism. Tribalism. Violence. Division. Name-calling. Political deception. Wars of ethnic cleansing. Power hungry tyrants. Greed and consumption and materialism. Sexual immorality, unfaithfulness, and confusion. A world of good people would not look like the world we see around us.

The unavoidable reality is simple. We are not that good. Half of the people can't be better than everyone they know. The math doesn't work out. If we are going to talk about goodness, we have to start by being brutally honest. We are not good.

The Bible says this very clearly. Over and over again. Psalm 14 describes God looking down from heaven to survey the people on earth. His conclusion from verse 3 is:

Psalm 14:3:

They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one.

The apostle Paul echoes the same idea in Romans 3.

Romans 3:23:

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

The great Reformer Martin Luther described human nature with a Latin phrase: "incurvatus in se," which means "curved inward on oneself." I resonate with that phrase. It seems to capture the complexity of sin well.

It is not as if humanity is all bad. There is something good. Something beautiful. Something even divine. The Bible says that we were created in the image of God. But that goodness within us wasn't destroyed. It was just bent. Misdirected. It was twisted toward an unhealthy goal. It is as if all evil is just our desire for goodness pointed in the wrong direction. Perhaps that's what evil is: goodness that has lost its way.

Even that drive for greatness comes from something good. But what often happens is that we sacrifice goodness in the attempt to achieve greatness. And sometimes, the very desire to become great is simply to cover up what we know about ourselves: that we are not good. I can't make myself good, but if I work hard, I can at least do something great.

When I was younger, I thought of myself as a pretty good person. But these days, I am deeply aware of what is flawed within me. My heart is such a mix of insecurities, petty grievances, misdirected longings, and sometimes delusions of grandeur. I can see on a daily basis the simple truth. There is something very wrong with me.

I resonate with what Jesus says in Matthew 7.

Matthew 7:17-18:

So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. 18 A healthy

tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit.

I know that I am a diseased tree. But I want to bear the fruit of goodness. Where do we go from here?

God is good

This is where the gospel of Jesus Christ comes in. Faith steps in change everything. But it doesn't start with me. It starts with God. The most basic declaration about God in the Bible is this: God is good.

Today, this is one of the most controversial statements in our culture. A generation ago, people had a hard time believing that God existed. Science and materialism and the harsh facts of a created world meant that people doubted that there was such a thing as a supernatural God.

But now, the obstacle is a different one. It is not the existence of God that people question. It is his goodness. People have a hard time believing that the God who has revealed himself in the Bible could in any way be categorized as good.

That is why in 2007, Christopher Hitchens published *God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. Hitchens suggests that Christianity isn't just unbelievable, it is actually dangerous. Our culture is convinced that people are generally good and God is generally bad.²

But just as the Bible speaks clearly about our own brokenness, it is even more abundantly clear that God is good.

Psalm 106:1:

Praise the Lord!
Oh give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever!

In the New Testament, Titus says something similar.

Titus 3:4:

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared,

These are only two of countless references to the goodness of God. The Bible is clear: God is good.

But what do we mean by saying that God is good? That he does good things? That he is always moral in all of his actions? Or is it deeper than that?

When I say that this shirt is red, I am comparing my shirt to an abstract concept that exists. There exists such a thing as redness. And this shirt corresponds well to the abstract idea of redness. Make sense?

But when I say that God is good, I mean something different. I am not judging God against some external abstract idea of goodness. It is not as if there is a thing called goodness, and I am evaluating whether God lines up with that. It is also not a reference to God's actions or morality.

God equals goodness. Goodness equals God. Everything God does is good. Not because it lines up with some external notion of goodness, but because God himself is the standard of goodness. His very nature, his essence, his being is simply good.

When my children accuse me of making a "dad joke," I ask them, "what other kind of joke can I possibly make? To you, every funny thing I say is a 'dad joke.'" That's what it means to say that God is good. Everything he does, everything he is, every part of him is good. He is what we mean when we talk about goodness.

The objection is obvious. If everything God does is good, what about all the terrible things that happen in this world? We have already talked about how much evil there is in the world. How can you reconcile that with a good God?

There are two simple answers. First, not everything that happens in this world is the will of God. God is all-powerful, but he has chosen the way of limitation. He has fashioned a creature with the capability to act in a way contrary to his design. Make no mistake: God is absolutely sovereign. But he does not enforce his will on his creation.

So why is there evil? Because God has allowed us to choose it. And choose it we have.

The second answer is better than the first. God has not prevented evil in this world. But he is capable of something incredible. He can take evil and turn it into good. That is the grand conclusion of the end of the book of Genesis. After seeing so much evil come out of what was meant to be beautiful, the main character Joseph concludes this about God:

Genesis 50:20:

As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.

People chose evil. But God turned it into good.

God is good. He is so good that he can transform evil into good.

We can be good because of God

Jesus said that diseased trees only produce bad fruit. But the apostle Paul says that we were created to do good.

Ephesians 2:10:

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

Think about that. You are God's good work. And you were created to complete the good works that He prepared for you. But all of this only happens "in Christ Jesus." That's the key. Christ is how God transforms evil into good within us.

In order for us to produce good fruit, God has to transform us into good trees. That is precisely what happens when you put your faith in Christ, believe in him, and follow him in your life. You become a good tree. What do good trees produce? Good fruit.

Here's how the theologian Steven Hein puts it,

*That Christ is the vine and we are the branches means that he produces the fruit through us. "To live in Christ is simply to bring forth the works of Christ," he says. "There are works that He produces simply by being who He is through each of us by virtue of who we are."*³

Do you see the beauty of that? We are good when Christ is himself through us being ourselves. His goodness is filtered through our lives.

That is why all the fruit of the Spirit comes about when you walk by the Spirit. When you walk with the Spirit in your life day by day, you are allowing Christ to live through you. When that happens, you lean into

your new identity as a good tree, producing the good fruit you were always meant to produce. Christ grows goodness in you.

Let's talk a bit more specifically about what these good works are. I am afraid we have too limited a view of what qualifies as good works.

We think of good works as unusual and remarkable. Stopping to help someone by the side of the road. Serving food to the homeless. Building a house in Mexico. These are good works, but the rest of our life is just normal.

That isn't at all the biblical view of goodness. Remember that the first good thing in the Bible was light. God created light and saw that the light was good.

How is light good? It is not ethically good. Or morally good. It is just ... good. Something deep within it marks it out as good. This is a bit of speculation, but I think light is good because it corresponds with something about the character of God. God is what defines good, after all.

When you turn on the light in the morning, you're doing a good work. Unless your spouse is still asleep, then it's almost unforgivable.

All this means is that when you walk by the Spirit, you produce goodness as a fruit. Not just spectacular acts of bravery and sacrifice, but the normal everyday kind of goodness that happens when you do your job, love the people around you, live into your gifts, cultivate beautiful things, and even when you rest.

When we walk by the Spirit, if we have Jesus Christ inside us, the things we do are good. They are good because they come out of a life lived in union with Christ and in step with the Spirit and because God himself is good.

Lastly, remember what is unique about fruit? Scott Grant pointed it out a few weeks ago. He observed that when you are patient with someone, that helps them be patient with the next person. Fruit is not a one-time event. Fruit grows and multiplies and leads to more fruit.

One more way that goodness is better than greatness. Goodness overflows to others. Greatness ends with you. In Christ, as you walk by the Spirit, you can be a good tree. And you can grow the fruit of goodness.

Conclusion

This morning we started thinking about what it means to say something is good. I hope you have a bit of a fuller picture of the kind of goodness God cultivates within us as we walk by the Spirit.

It is not something that comes from us. We can sometimes be pretty good. But the harsh reality is that we are not good.

Even though it may not always seem true to us, we know that God is good. Not because he lives up to some standard in our minds, but because he is the standard.

And because of that, he can make us good. His life, lived within us, produces the fruit of goodness.

We do not have to strive for greatness. Accumulating accomplishments won't make us good. Only God can do that. Walk by the spirit. Allow Christ to live out his life within you. And watch as goodness grows within you.

Endnotes

1. Chris Melore, "Nearly half of Americans think they're a better person than EVERYONE they know!," StudyFinds, May 6, 2021, <https://www.studyfinds.org/half-americans-think-better-person-than-everyone/>.
2. Christopher Hitchens, *God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (US Publication: New York, NY: Twelve Books, 2007).
- 3 Steven A Hein, *The Christian Life: Cross or Glory?* (Irvine, CA: New Reformation Publications, 2015), 133, quoted in Gene Veith, *Working for Our Neighbor: A Lutheran Primer on Vocation, Economics, and Ordinary Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian's Library Press) Kindle Edition, Kindle Locations 1430-1432.