

The Fruit of the Spirit is... Goodness

Genesis 50:15-21 Mark 10:17-31

Continuing our series on the fruit of the Spirit. This morning: goodness.

Genesis 50:15-21

¹⁵Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph's brothers said, "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?" ¹⁶So they approached Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this instruction before he died, ¹⁷Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you.' Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke to him. ¹⁸Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, "We are here as your slaves." ¹⁹But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? ²⁰Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for **good**, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. ²¹So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones." In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them. (remember about kindness: showing love to those we might consider as enemies, who tax our patience; this is a good example of kindness; and, as we will see, God's goodness)

Mark 10:17-27

¹⁷ As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, 'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' ¹⁸Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. ¹⁹You know the commandments: "You shall *not* murder; You shall *not* commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall *not* defraud; Honor your father and mother.'" ' ²⁰He said to him, 'Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.' ²¹Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, 'You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.' ²²When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

23 Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, 'How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!' ²⁴And the disciples were perplexed at these words (because the prevailing mindset was that wealth was seen as a sign of God's blessing, not as a potential obstacle to the Kingdom of Heaven). But Jesus said to them again, 'Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.' ²⁶They were greatly astounded and said to one another, 'Then who can be saved?' (in other words, if we assumed everyone's life goal was to achieve God's blessing of prosperity, but now you're telling us prosperity makes things difficult, who then can be saved?). ²⁷Jesus looked at them and said, 'For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.'

This is the word of the Lord! **Thanks be to God!**

Let's talk about goodness. We have a lot of colloquial phrases associated with this word: For example, if someone asks you "How are you?" You might say, "I'm good." Or, about a situation we might say, "It's all good." Or, "good grief" (Charlie Brown...one of his favorite expressions; where did that come from anyway?). Or how about the expression, "For goodness sake!" which reminds me of something I heard growing up, "Be good for goodness sake!" Otherwise Santa won't bring you any toys—you get coal in your stocking; because, "he sees you when you're sleeping, he knows when you're awake, he knows if you've been bad or good, so...be good for goodness' sake." What a terrible way to make kids behave! Unfortunately, many people think of God that way too. Behave yourself,

or else. And that is sad because it lacks grace; we are *good news* people, and the good news is about grace.

Anyway, the word good or goodness is our default word for anything generally positive. And that is, well, a good thing! Goodness *is* a positive thing, as are all of the fruit of the Spirit. It's positive for us, and there are positive affects *through* us to others and to the world.

Goodness is the one fruit of the Spirit that is evident in creation. Goodness is at the *core* of creation, actually, because it tells us in Genesis that "God saw everything that he made, and behold, it was good." And not just good, but "*very good.*" So, a beginning point for understanding goodness, is that it means that there is an inherent goodness and wholeness in creation—in nature, animals, and in people. That may be hard to believe these days, and hard to see, but there *is* an inherent goodness to the world. We actually need to remember and see that *more* these days. The inherent goodness built into the created order.

And that doesn't mean that things don't get messed up. Of course they do. It's just that the messed-up-ness of the world, or of people, or politics, is not the last word. Nor is it the first word. The first word is, God made everything good. Like, really good. And God redeems everything in his goodness. Let's not forget

to start reading the Bible at Genesis 1, not at Genesis 3! But even after Genesis 3 God's goodness is still evident in his redeeming actions.

So, part of what it means to have goodness, as a fruit of the Spirit in our lives, then, is to *see* good—in the world, and in others. Goodness begins with clear vision; right vision, and the ability to see good and affirm it. This is why Eugene Peterson described goodness this way in the Message translation: “a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people.” (repeat)

That's why someone we would describe as a good person isn't just someone who does good deeds, but who sees good around them, and affirms it. A great example in the Bible is Barnabas. The disciples nicknamed him son of encouragement. Because in the book of Acts it tells us that Barnabas came to Antioch (which had a reputation as a sordid city in the Roman empire, by the way), he saw the grace of God at work through the believers, and he rejoiced—and it says after that in Acts 11:24, that he was “a good man, full of the Holy Spirit, and of faith, and many people were brought to the Lord.”

He was a good man in the best sense of the word. Because he saw good, and affirmed it. He was also the only person who would associate with Paul at first after his conversion. Clearly Barnabas saw good in him—he who persecuted

the Christians before his conversion. Everyone else was afraid of Paul and kept him at more than a social distance! Instead of 6 feet, 6 miles was better! Only Barnabas saw the good in him—that is, what God was doing in and through him.

So, goodness is an ability to see good, and affirm it. Now, let's back up for a moment...

As we read through the Bible—both Old and New Testaments—goodness is described, first, as an attribute of God, and a work of God.

This man, in our reading from Mark, who addresses Jesus as “good teacher” gets this reply from Jesus: “Why do you call *me* good? No one is good but God alone.” Jesus is not denying his own goodness here, or anyone else's, but he is trying to point out to this man that goodness is an attribute that belongs first and foremost to God. He wants this questioner to reflect on his words, and what was his motivation for calling Jesus good. Calling him ‘good teacher’ might have been a bit of flattery. A bit disingenuous. Or maybe it was genuine. Either way, Jesus wants this guy to think through what he's saying, and point to God as the only one who truly is good, and from whom all goodness proceeds.

Jesus, and all faithful Jewish folks, would've had the Hebrew scriptures memorized (the Old Testament). And in those scriptures the affirmation of God's

goodness is written on every page, which is why Jesus affirms that goodness belongs to God, first and foremost. For example:

Ps.136:1: *Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. God's love endures forever.*

Psalm 27:13-14 (which provides the assurance of forgiveness in our order of worship): *I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Therefore wait for the Lord; be strong and let your heart take courage.*

Ps.119:68: David prays, *You are good, and what you do is good; teach me your decrees.* (recognizing that any goodness we might have is learned from God)

Exodus 33:19: Moses asks to see God face to face, and God says, "It'll kill you if you do; however, I will hide you in the cleft of a rock and "I will make all my goodness pass by you" (goodness=God's essence, God's presence). Moses only gets to see it in part, but it is enough. God's goodness.

The point here is, goodness is first and foremost an attribute of God, but it is also a work of God.

Because out of God's goodness, God does good and makes good. As mentioned earlier, God made the world good (very good, actually). And again, that doesn't mean things don't get messed up. Of course they do—because part

of the goodness of God is that God created human beings with free will, which means that, in our exercise of free will, sometimes we humans make a mess of things.

But one of the things that God does so very well, is to make good, even out of messed up situations. From chapter 3 in Genesis and on from there throughout the Bible we see God redeeming, re-creating good, out of messed up situations—reconciling people, healing people of diseases and disorders, turning violence into peace and so forth. This was a hallmark of Jesus’ ministry. Peter proclaims to the people in Acts 10:38 how “Jesus went about doing good, and healing those who were oppressed.” This is what Jesus was known for.

The great affirmation of this is in Rom.8:28: “God works all things together for *good*—for those who love God and are called according to his purpose.”

In the Genesis 50 reading: Joseph recognized this bigger picture, and saw God’s good purposes, even in the awful treatment he received at the hands his brothers, and he saw the good outcome that God was working out. Joseph was able to see good, and affirm it, even through terrible circumstances. Because Joseph knew that it is in God’s nature to work things out for good. It’s just what God does, and does well.

Goodness is an attribute of God, and a work of God. God does good, and God makes good. God redeems, re-creates, restores.

Now, on *our* side of things, as God pours out his Spirit of goodness on us, as a fruit of the Spirit, goodness is:

Doing what is right. Even when it hurts or costs us something.

This isn't the same as trying to be perfect. That's impossible. That's probably why Jesus says, "No one is good but God alone." Perhaps it's his way of saying, "No one is perfect; and no one perfectly keeps all of the rules and laws" and so forth. I hope that doesn't come as a surprise to any of you!

Sometimes we associate goodness with someone who is, maybe, morally pure; but that isn't what goodness *is*. For example, the Pharisees were obsessed with moral purity, rules, laws and commandments, and Jesus consistently explained that they were missing the point. That isn't really what goodness is about—rule-keeping and all that. Because rule-keeping is often about what we *don't* do.

Goodness should never be defined negatively, and Jesus playfully interacts with this man in our account this morning who asks about earning the golden ticket to eternal life, by telling him, "You know the commands..." (you silly man!)

and then Jesus rattles off a bunch of ‘thou shalt **not’s**.’ I find this to be a playful interaction, because Jesus could’ve gone straight to the point of inviting this guy to sell his stuff and follow him, but he needed to have this guy understand that goodness is not defined negatively, by what we **don’t** do.

And the guy replies by saying, I’ve perfectly followed those commands; no sweat: I haven’t murdered anyone; I haven’t committed adultery; I haven’t defrauded anyone. And Jesus says, that isn’t enough—it misses the point of the heart and intent of the law. Then Jesus redefines goodness as something that he should DO. Not a list of things he *shouldn’t* do. And the good that Jesus gives this guy to *do* is something that is costly.

Obviously by the way this man reacts (“shocked and grieving” as Mark puts it), it was too painful for him to do what Jesus told him. Jesus was inviting him to a goodness that flows out of the generosity of his heart to those in need; not to *further* obedience to rules or laws—as necessary as those are; do what God says, by all means! They’re just not enough. Goodness is a matter of doing good, out of a loving heart and a clear vision that sees good around us.

And by the way, I love it that Mark points out to us that Jesus looked at him and loved him. Now there is clarity of vision! The call to costly discipleship does

not come from a grumpy Jesus, but a loving Jesus, who looks at us, and loves us.

Even if *we* are grumpy about what he asks us to do!

Goodness is about seeing good and affirming it; and it's about doing what is good, and right, even if it costs us. Hear how the apostle Paul puts it:

Gal.6:9-10: So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at the harvest time if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all... (I love the "of all" part of this)

Eph.2:10: For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

Jesus, in Matt.5:16: Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

In all of these, goodness is about what we **do**, as God pours his Spirit out upon us, and into us. Even further, goodness is really about who we *are*, and our experience of having received God's love. Because our goodness is something that has to come from God first, as an attribute that God shares with us. The pouring out of the Spirit has to come first. Otherwise, we're tempted to simply be do-gooders, which is not the same as having goodness.

And so I want to be clear that when Scriptures teach us to do good, it is assumed that there is a spiritual connection at work. As Jesus said, “Abide in me, as I abide in you, and you’ll bear fruit.” If we’re not abiding, then doing good can easily become a duty and perhaps even a burden; and it may make us grouchy. As the apostle Paul said, “God loves a cheerful giver.” Having said that, sometimes the act of giving makes us cheerful and gets us out of our grumpiness. Anyway, the point is, if we’re simply do-gooders, our do-goodism can lead to burnout, and even to misguided good works, or worse, meddling.

Just for fun I looked it up, and the Oxford dictionary definition of do-gooder is: “a well-meaning but unrealistic or interfering philanthropist or reformer.” Dictionary.com defined do-gooder this way: “the itch to interfere in other people's lives.” With all good intentions, of course. But do-goodism almost always has strings attached to it. Where we “help” someone and expect them to change, or we might expect to be congratulated or patted on the back or expect something in return.

God does not call us to be do-gooders, but *good doers* out of a call to follow Jesus. With no strings attached.

I want to return to what I said at the beginning: that goodness is seeing good and affirming it. Because I believe that when Jesus calls people to follow him, what he is basically doing is giving them a new way of seeing, a fresh vision, a new set of glasses. A new way of seeing ourselves, a new way of seeing others, a new way of seeing the world. And that new vision, what those new glasses reveal, is a basic goodness in things and people. This new vision shows us that God is at work—even though things may look messed up at first glance—and that God is redeeming people, and relationships, and healing the pain and brokenness of the world. We just need to be able to see it. And when we can see God at work, we can then do good from a place of positivity, and energy, and out of a sense of true calling. We can be generous people, and not walk away shocked or grieving, because we don't see our giving things up as a cost, really, but as something that fits in a larger framework of what God is doing.

Find the Good. Heather Lunde is an obituary writer for a local paper in the village of Haines, Alaska. She tells the stories of people and of her experiences from the village and surrounding area; her work as a writer has disciplined her to, well, find the good. She says things like, “Stop and smell the fish” (I can relate to that!)—take time to see the good, and enjoy and affirm it. And do good. It will lift your spirits, and you'll find a connection with God, because God is good.

Here is a quote for you, and a good life principle to abide by. Heidi and I love this:

“The best criticism of the bad is the practice of the better.” (or, of the good)