

Introduction

The other day I was over at my daughter's house. We were working on a project together, and she was offering me snacks. And I was taking her up on it. After sampling a little of this and a little of that, she said, "Dad, try these blackberries; they are really good." So I did. You know, there is a lot of fruit out there, and a lot of it is so-so. When you taste good fruit, you know it. And when I selected one of those blackberries and put it in my mouth, I knew it was indeed good. I ate another and another. This morning we are turning not just to good fruit but the fruit that is truly good. In fact we read in Galatians 5:22 that the fruit of the Spirit includes goodness itself. Our text for the morning sets forth what is good in the life of a Christ follower.

[Read text and Pray]

Think for a minute about one of the most common words we use every day—good. We ask, "Are you good? ... Are we good? ... Are you being good? How was your sleep? Good." We exclaim, "Oh my GOOD-ness!" We say, "The weather is good ... the food is good ... the train is good ... God is good ... the church is good ... the game was good... the scenery is good ... it's a good car ... the police are good ... the temperature is good ... the music is good ... the paint is good ... the phone is good ... the distance is good ... the shirt is good." I could go on and on. I probably have gone on enough to more than make my point. Is that good? We say GOOD over and over about so many things, and we mean so many different things by it.

When the Apostle Paul was describing for the Galatians the character qualities that are being produced like fruit in the Christian, he included the concept of GOODNESS. It is the most challenging aspect of the list of nine characteristics called the fruit of the Spirit. The challenge is to know with certainty and clarity and precision what he is talking about. The Greek word Paul used for GOODNESS is rare. The word-Geeks have discovered this word nowhere in secular usage, and it occurs only four times in the New Testament. As a result scholars and preachers are somewhat conflicted when it comes to spelling out the meaning of the aspect of the fruit of the Spirit that is goodness. When you consult commentaries and listen to sermons, you will encounter opinions that vary. The specifics I am going to set forth to you this morning are my own best attempt to put the linguistic matters together with the whole of scripture. My goal is to provide an accurate and trustworthy expression of what Paul is speaking about when he says GOODNESS is fruit of the Spirit. And of course, I am attempting to assist us all to make an appropriate application to our lives.

Thankfully, the New Testament does contain a number of varying forms of the root word for goodness. And I am confident these instances provide a sufficient supply of clarity that enables us to be reasonably certain of what the Holy Spirit, breathing out through the Apostle Paul, has in mind when he asserts that the fruit of the Spirit includes goodness. It is a general sort of term, but there are a number of specific marks of goodness.

Most generally speaking,

I. Good is the Opposite of Evil.

It is born out in our focal text this morning. We read Romans 12:9-21 and if you noticed, this cluster of verses is like a row of books bound and pressed together in summary form by two bookends. In verse 9, Paul says, "Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good." Here are two opposite things;

hate the one and hold fast to the other. Love one and rid yourself of the other. The thing to be abhorred is evil. The thing to cling to tightly is good. These are opposites.

The bookend at the other side emphasizes yet again the opposition between these two matters. In verse 21 Paul urges us, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." What is good is opposed to what is evil. What is evil is opposed to what is good. One will overcome the other. The two cannot exist together in harmony. It is impossible because they are paradoxical, antithetical, contradictory to one another.

John says something similar in his third epistle. The entire letter is an illustration of the adversity between good and evil. He is writing to Gaius to encourage him for exemplifying godliness and to encourage him to continue. Gaius had welcomed and served the traveling missionaries who came through his town and to his church. Gaius went to a lot of trouble to extend hospitality and assistance to them. But there was another guy there in town who behaved completely the opposite. Diotrophes refused to acknowledge apostolic authority. He refused to welcome the brothers. He was so opposed to them that he even went so far as to attempt to put out of the church anyone in the church who wanted to help the brothers.

Gaius and Diotrophes are totally opposite one another. One shows hospitality; the other is spiteful. One represents GOOD and the other EVIL. So as John begins to conclude the letter he writes, "Beloved, do not imitate evil but imitate good. Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God." Perhaps the thing we can say about goodness with the greatest clarity and most precision is this: Goodness is the opposite of evil. If it is evil, it is not good, and if it is good, it is not evil. What does the Holy Spirit produce as fruit in the lives of those who belong to Christ, who are indwelt with the Holy Spirit? Not evil but good.

We need to see everything related to the will of God in terms of good and evil. Paul uses the word good in Romans 12:2 to describe the will of God. He says, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is GOOD and acceptable and perfect." If something (an action, attitude, thought, or motive) is in accord with the will of God, it is good. If something—action, attitude, or motive—is not in accord with the will of God, it is not GOOD or acceptable or perfect. It is EVIL. What fruit does the Spirit produce in those who walk according to his leading and power? He produces good. He produces that which is according to the will of God—a spirit that acknowledges authority and submits to it. He does not produce an independent spirit like Diotrophes who rejects authority and always likes to put himself first.

The fruit of the Spirit is goodness not evil. Goodness discerns and desires the GOOD will of God. So that is the first thing we will say today: goodness is the opposite of evil. And that is born out in the will of God.

Second, I want you to see ...

II. Goodness Is Essential to God.

We can't consider goodness as part of the fruit of the Spirit without giving attention to the fact that God himself is good. This fact came clearly out in the open when one day a wealthy young ruler approached Jesus. He was a prominent official among the Jews. He approached Jesus with the question "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" And the heart of his question was off because he misunderstood the being of God. It was manifest in the way he approached Jesus from the outset.

The young ruler, before he asked the question, sought Jesus's attention by calling him "Good Teacher."

The first issue that needed to be addressed was this one. Jesus asked the ruler, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone." Jesus was not denying that he was God or that he was good. He was addressing a misunderstanding manifested in that the man looked at him as an ordinary human being and called him good. If you just see me as a teacher, you are wrong to call me good. Only God is truly good. God ALONE is good. In effect, Jesus was in the process of alluring this man to confess that Jesus was God and therefore IS good. Truly God is good. He is good in every extent of his being. Ezra 3:11; 1 Chronicles 16:34; Psalm 106:1; 107:1; 118:1; and Psalm 136:1 all call people to give thanks to the Lord, for he is GOOD. Psalm 25:8 declares, "Good and upright is the Lord." Psalm 119:68 speaks to the Lord saying, "You are good." God's people join together saying God is good all the time and all the time God is good.

Stephen Charnock, puritan theologian par excellence, states: "This is the true and genuine character of God. He is good, he is goodness, good in himself, good in his essence, good in highest degree, possessing whatsoever is comely, excellent, desirable; the highest good, because the first good ... all the names of God are comprehended in this one of good."

So what does it mean that God is good? Should we not say that the goodness of God is an all-encompassing expression? Indeed that God is good expresses that everything about him is perfect and right and full and whole, that there is certainly no evil, no defect and no imperfection.

And of course, if God is truly and perfectly good, then all that pertains directly to him is good. Not only his character but also his rules are good according to Psalm 119:39. And not only are his character and rules good, but so are his works; Psalm 119:68 says to the Lord "You are good and you do good."

How clearly God's goodness and good works are born out in his work of creation. God himself affirms of the creation that it is good. And by the end of the week of creation, God declares that everything he has made was good, good. It was very good. Further, God gives good gifts to his children. And God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God who are called according to his purpose.

Jesus, the Son of God, is good. He fulfills all God's good rules. He does the good will of God the Father. He is the GOOD shepherd.

The goodness of God's work is seen preeminently in the provision of redemption. This is his greatest work of goodness. Psalm 86:5 says, "you, O LORD, are good and forgiving." Yet the forgiveness of God does not come without a cost. The goodness of God cannot and will not be compromised. Part of the overall goodness of God is that he is holy, perfectly pure, spotless, and transcendent. His law for human beings bears that same quality of goodness. Yet we have broken that law over and over. This is what Jesus was indirectly seeking to demonstrate to the rich young official. He pointed him to the law, but the man wrongly asserted that he had kept it. Like him, each of us has broken the law of God not only in action but in thought and attitude.

In his goodness God will by no means simply clear the guilty. For God to preserve his goodness and provide forgiveness, he must extend grace and mercy beyond human comprehension. Breaking God's law incurs a debt to God; it requires restitution. How can God be just and justify the sinner?

This he did by sending a substitute. Jesus is truly good. He is not merely a good teacher; he is the good and holy Son of God. He relinquished equality with God and became flesh and dwelt among us. And unlike us, he perfectly kept the good law of God. This qualified him to take the place of sinners and receive unto himself the punishment for which their sins called. He received it, absorbed it, and satisfied the wrath of God. He paid the debt sinners owed. He offers redemption to all. And everyone who will turn to him in faith will receive this glorious and good gift. God is truly good. Who among us would die to rescue a good person let alone a bad one? And yet God demonstrates his love and his goodness in that while we were sinners Christ died for us.

Are you believing on Christ today? Do you know the goodness of God at its greatest level? If not, I urge you, oh that I could persuade you, to draw near to God in faith. Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved. It does not take your works to be saved. All your works and all my works together amount to nothing more than a pile of manure. It is a pile of not-goodness, a heap of rubbish, a mass of filthy rags. But God is gracious. He does the saving work as a gift through faith. And yet he saves us for the purpose of doing GOOD works. That's where we turn next and last this morning.

III. God's Goodness Is Produced in Human Beings.

The fruit of the Spirit is the collection of characteristics God is producing in human beings that exhibits his own glorious character. Let me take you to 2 Peter 1:3. It is a familiar text to us here at GCC. "His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness." Now let me ask you, what is godliness but being like God in his goodness. God imparts to his redeemed everything we need to be like him in his goodness. In fact, says Peter, "he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you might become partakers of the divine nature." The divine nature is certainly NOT a reference to what we call the INCOMMUNICABLE attributes of God. These include omniscience, omnipresence, omnipotence, essence, sovereignty, and the like. That would mean becoming God. But the divine nature to which Peter is referring is something that humans CAN become partakers of—ways in which humans can be like God.

Human beings were made in the image of God and meant to be images of God. We were meant to be like living portraits of God in the creation—portraits which display God's presence and glory, which display his divine nature. Part of that portrayal is the GOODNESS of God because God is good.

The fruit of the Spirit is a cluster of God's attributes in which redeemed human beings are made to be partakers by the work of God the Holy Spirit in them—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, and so on. It is not surprising at all that Paul includes in this list goodness since, as we have seen, goodness is one of those attributes we recognize to be true of God.

And it is also not surprising since we are told in Ephesians 2 that we have been saved by faith NOT as a result of works, but that we ARE God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus FOR GOOD WORKS, which God prepared before hand that we should walk in them. We who have come to Christ in faith were redeemed from being dead in our trespasses and sins in which we formerly walked. He saved us from living in the passions of our flesh as children of wrath so that we might instead do GOOD works and so resemble God in his goodness. So that brings us back to the question what is the goodness and what are the good works about which the Bible speaks?

On the basis of what we have said thus far, we must conclude that the goodness in which we have been saved to live is first not evil. We are to live out what is right and not evil. Second, we add that

to do good is to do the WILL of God, that which is GOOD and acceptable and perfect. Third, it is GODLY, like God in his goodness.

But can we be more specific about goodness as fruit of the Spirit? Yes, I believe we can. At the same time we must bear in mind that to point out specifics is not to exhaust the possibilities. But here goes. Look with me back at Romans 12. In verse 9 Paul tells us to abhor what is evil and hold fast to what is good. Again, as we noted earlier, he ends the section by saying, "do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good." What comes between these two verses is a non-exhaustive (nevertheless quite extensive) list of definitive examples of goodness and good works.

It is a long list so I won't have time to comment on everything. But hear the items on the list and hear the voice of the Holy Spirit speaking to you about particular areas in your life that need attention.

Goodness is loving one another with brotherly affection. Brotherly affection is different from what we always stress about agape. Agape is loving people to do good to them regardless of how you might feel about them. Brotherly affection involves warm feelings of belonging together. This is the way God means it to be in the family of faith. You say, "but feelings are not something I can control." I say, "you are right, but we are talking about what the Spirit produces in the believer." And if the Spirit is at work in us—we are walking in the Spirit—we will be loving our brothers and sisters with increasing warmth and acceptance, knowing we share the same Father, embracing that we are in this thing together.

Goodness is showing honor. Paul says, "outdo one another in showing honor." Honor is treating another person as being of value and worth. Showing honor means we regard each other as important and care for each other accordingly. That is goodness.

Goodness is zealous, passionate, intense. It has to do with how we serve the Lord. It is serving the Lord with gladness not reluctance or lazily. Here is an area where we really need the power and work of the Holy Spirit. I observe this characteristic in those men and women who are enthusiastic about doing God's will. They don't drag around. They move forward with joy and expectancy.

Then there are hope and patience in tribulation. We talked about that recently when we looked at patience.

Next is a really GOOD one. Paul says to be constant in prayer. Goodness involves praying persistently and constantly. You probably never thought of prayer as a fruit of the Spirit. Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there the need, the opportunity, and the joy of prayer will move a man or woman by the power of the Spirit to be on their knees and in their closet communing with the Lord and interceding with him.

What does Paul say next? "Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality." Here is kindness. It is also goodness. It corresponds to III John where he commends Gaius for engaging himself to assist the traveling missionaries but condemns Diotrephes for resisting kindness to them. Hospitality and generosity especially toward believers are works of the Spirit in us that reflect the goodness of God.

In verses 14 and following Paul seems to spread the scope of his attention wider to include not only the church body but also the world outside. Goodness blesses those who persecute. It shares in the raw feelings of the situations through which people pass—some grievous and some thrilling.

Goodness, furthermore, conducts itself with humility, associates with those the world casts out, and strives not to think highly of itself.

And then there is the matter of mistreatment and vengeance. Goodness is gracious under fire. It refuses to take vengeance but does good to those who offend and abuse. That's how evil is overcome with good.

I made my own list of good works and marks of goodness in the people of God to add to what Paul says here. Goodness is honest. It is characterized by integrity. Goodness is just, not corrupt. Goodness is impartial and fair. It is steadfast. Goodness is pure and chaste—not promiscuous and sexually immoral. Goodness is filled with gratitude. Goodness is diligent and strives for excellence in serving the Lord. Goodness preserves life and protects the helpless. Goodness delights in God's good providence, knowing no matter what is going on, God is working it together for good to those who love the Lord.

Conclusion

So there we have it. The fruit of the Spirit is goodness. Certainly, it is not evil. And its goodness is good in many, many ways. As fruit of the Spirit it is not something we produce by trying really hard to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. It is what is produced in us and through us by Christ himself through the operation of the Holy Spirit. We must remain locked-in to Christ. Apart from him we can do nothing, but whoever abides in him he it is that bears much fruit. May it be that we bear a lot of GOOD fruit!