

The Fruit of the Spirit: Goodness

We've come in our study of the fruit of the Spirit to the virtue of goodness. Studying "goodness" was interesting for me this past week. To be honest, I started to panic on Tuesday because I really didn't have a bead on the biblical concept of goodness. "Goodness" has always seemed like a rather vague and general concept to me. I was starting to wonder if I would have anything helpful to say this morning.

But the more I pondered passages that mention the goodness of God, an emphasis began to emerge, namely ***the effect*** of God's goodness. Time and time again various authors in Scripture suggest that ***the goodness of God assures us that He can always be trusted***. Because God is good He can be trusted. We'll spend most of our time looking at this specific effect of God's goodness in our lives. But we'll also discuss how the goodness of God has some rather intriguing and powerful implications for the goodness that the Holy Spirit wants to produce in our lives.

The Effect of the God's Goodness: The goodness of God assures us that He can always be trusted. (Psalm 31, Psalm 23, Psalm 34, James 1)

Scripture emphasizes that because God is good, His intentions and actions are always directed toward our well-being. His intentions and actions toward us are never evil. Many of us learned a meal-time prayer as children which goes:

"God is great, God is good. And we thank Him for our food. Amen."

The greatness of God and goodness of God complement each other. God could be great (powerful, wise, eternal, sovereign, majestic, etc.) and also be cruel. That's often the case with humans: people with greatness (whether the leader of a country or an international corporation) aren't necessarily good. But God is not only great; He is also good. He never uses His greatness in ways that are evil. We find this assurance in many different Scriptures. Let's consider a few of those Scriptures now.

Psalm 31 is an interesting case study in the goodness of God. David experienced as much heartache as almost anybody in Scripture. He spent his 20s living in the wilderness running from King Saul who wanted to kill him. Even though he eventually ruled as king of Israel, David had a hard life in many ways. For example, he experienced the death of an infant son, betrayal by family and friends, and the death of his son Absalom. Psalm 31 is a lament in which David is crying out to God for relief. Consider verses 9-13:

9 Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress;
My eye is wasted away from grief, my soul and my body *also*.

In verse 10 we see that his grief of soul and body was partially due to his own sin.

10 For my life is spent with sorrow
And my years with sighing;

My strength has failed because of my iniquity,
And my body has wasted away.

Our own sinfulness can be as oppressive and heavy as other burdens. Sin siphons off energy and life like nothing else. But David also faced all sorts of external threats.

11 Because of all my adversaries, I have become a reproach,
Especially to my neighbors,
And an object of dread to my acquaintances;
Those who see me in the street flee from me.
12 I am forgotten as a dead man, out of mind;
I am like a broken vessel.
13 For I have heard the slander of many,
Terror is on every side;
While they took counsel together against me,
They schemed to take away my life.

Even though David was distressed because of his own sin and because of his enemies, he trusted in God (v. 14) and **acknowledged His goodness**. In verse 19 we read:

19 How great is Your goodness,
Which You have stored up for those who fear You,
Which You have wrought for those who take refuge in You,
Before the sons of men!

David was careful not to confuse his circumstances with the character of God. He could have looked at his own sin and said, "God, if you were good, You wouldn't have let me sin against Bathsheba and Uriah; You would have stepped in and kept me from myself." And he could have looked at those ten years in the wilderness and said, "God, if you were good, You would have defeated my enemies long ago. I've wasted a decade of my life living in caves and living in fear!"

But David didn't say those things. Even though his life was hard, he trusted in the goodness of God: "How great is Your goodness, which You have stored up for those who fear You." David didn't misinterpret his circumstances and accuse God of not being good. That would be the worst of both worlds!

Just because life is hard doesn't mean that God isn't good. Like David, if your life is hard right now (if you're dealing with tough relationships, circumstances; if you're suffering in some way), it's all the more important to cling to the goodness of God.

Some have tried to preserve the goodness of God at the expense of other attributes revealed in Scripture. For example, Harold Kushner wrote a rather influential book (1981) entitled *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. Kushner wrestled with the problem of evil in the world in light of the personal tragedy he had experienced in his life (death of a son). He asks the question, "How can a good, loving God allow so much suffering in the world?" His conclusion is that God is good but not all-powerful.

Kushner says that God really is good and would love to eliminate our suffering, but He isn't powerful enough to step into our circumstances and do anything about our suffering. He basically rejects something that's taught in the Bible (God is all-powerful) in order to have a tidy answer to the problem of suffering.

But that sort of "solution" creates more problems than it solves. It's much better to live with the ambiguity/tension between the two; we need the humility to admit that any perceived inconsistencies between God's power and God's goodness are merely that - perceived. Even though we don't understand everything that happens in our world, we declare along with David, "How great is Your goodness which you have stored up for those who take refuge in You."

In Psalm 23 David again speaks about God's goodness. In this psalm David eloquently describes God's guidance, protection, and provision. Even though David experienced all sorts of heartache and suffering, he was able to say, "The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want." In verse 6 David expresses this conviction about God's goodness:

6 Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life,
And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

He's talking about **God's** goodness and **God's** lovingkindness following Him. David had a sense that God's goodness was "following" or **pursuing** him. The rest of his life, whenever he glanced behind him, he would see God's goodness nipping at his heels. Instead of feeling like he had to cajole or convince God to show him a little goodness, he felt like God's goodness was pursuing (and overtaking) him. That's what a good shepherd does; He keeps His eyes on the sheep, looking for opportunities to show goodness. In John 10 Jesus identified Himself with "the LORD" of the old testament when He said, "I am the Good Shepherd." We experience God's goodness through Jesus' wise, loving care for us as His flock.

In Psalm 34:8 David extends this invitation:

8 O taste and see that the Lord is good;
How blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him!

David is telling people (including us), "You don't have to take my word for it. . . taste and see that the Lord is good." You may have heard your entire life that "God is great, God is good," but you've been skeptical. Given what you've experienced in your life, you may have a terribly difficult time believing that God is good - that He really is committed to bringing good things into your life. And so David extends this invitation to experience the goodness of God by taking refuge in Him - fleeing **to** Him for protection instead of running **from** Him.

In the New Testament we find expressions of God's goodness in many different places. One of the most intriguing is found in James 1. There James writes this:

13 Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone.

James anticipates that someone might blame God for some enticement to sin. It's legitimate to say that God "tests people" through trials (James 1:2-4), but that doesn't mean that God "tempts" people in the sense of enticing them to sin. The same Greek term is used for trials and temptations, but it's important to distinguish between the two. God tests us but He doesn't tempt us. In essence James appeals to the goodness of God when he argues that nobody can say, "I am being tempted by God" because "God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone." Being "good," God is in no way inclined toward evil. Therefore He would never entice someone else toward evil.

As a matter of fact, James writes, our enticement comes from our own lusts:

14 But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust.
15 Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death. 16 Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren.

James circles back to God in verse 17. Instead of enticing people toward evil, God gives gifts which are good:

17 Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow.

If you experience something good or some blessing, God has given you a good gift. Think about family and friends, spiritual gifts, food and drink, shelter and transportation, knowledge and wisdom, sunsets and flowers. These are all good gifts that have come down from "the Father of lights." One way that God the Father demonstrates His goodness is by giving good gifts to His children (Matthew 7:11).

One of the foundational convictions that we should carry through this life is that **God is good**. God never does evil and He never has evil intentions toward us. This conviction will affect the way we think about God and consequently the way we treat others.

In the book of Genesis, Joseph provides a fascinating case study of someone who lived with the conviction that God is good. If Joseph had fixed his eyes on his circumstances, he might have concluded that God had it out for him: His brothers had sold him into slavery and convinced his father that he was dead. As a slave in Egypt Joseph was falsely accused and thrown into prison; he suffered injustice. Years later he rose to a place of prominence in Pharaoh's government and was in a position to save his entire family from famine. Even though Joseph was reconciled with his brothers they had a sinking feeling that sooner or later he would take revenge on them. After their father (Jacob/Israel) died, they thought that surely Joseph would exact revenge and pay them back for all the suffering they'd caused him. But listen to Joseph's reply to his brothers (Genesis 50):

19 But Joseph said to them, “Do not be afraid, for am I in God’s place? 20 “As for you, you meant evil against me, *but* God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive. 21 “So therefore, do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your little ones.” So he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.

Joseph saw things very clearly, didn’t he? He saw that the good intentions of God trumped the evil intentions of his brothers. In a very tangible, practical way Joseph believed that God is good even when life isn’t. Consequently, Joseph very naturally and instinctively showed goodness to his brothers. He didn’t treat them as *they* had treated him; he treated them as **God** had treated him.

I think you’ll agree that showing such goodness - the very goodness of God - to others is a powerful way to live your life. The Holy Spirit wants to give us the capacity to live that very type of life. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness. . .

The Fruit of Goodness: Showing others the same goodness that God has shown us. (Luke 6:43, Ephesians 5:7-10, Amos 5:14-15, Romans 15:14, Galatians 6:9-10)

The term “goodness” is found only four times in the NT, but in dozens of places we are urged to do good works and bear good fruit. Let’s look at a few of these verses, keeping in mind that any goodness we show others is a reflection of the goodness that God has shown us. Jesus pointed out (to the rich young ruler) that ultimately only God is good (Matthew 19:17). Our goodness is the fruit of His goodness flowing through us.

Luke 6:45 is insightful. After pointing out that a tree is known by its fruit (When you see apples on a tree you naturally conclude, “That’s an apple tree.”), He said:

45 “The good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth what is good; and the evil *man* out of the evil *treasure* brings forth what is evil; for his mouth speaks from that which fills his heart.”

This confirms that goodness is a heart-issue. Jesus is describing how our goodness should fill our hearts and then overflow into our words and actions. Like God’s goodness, the intentions of our hearts should always be directed toward the well-being of others. If we’re full of goodness we don’t have any malice toward others and we don’t want to see others experience pain and/or evil. No, on a heart level we want to see people thrive and flourish in every way - physically, mentally, socially, and spiritually.

If that type of goodness fills our hearts, it will definitely show up in our words and our actions: we bring forth good words and deeds out of the good treasure of our hearts. The result will be similar to what David described in Psalm 23 about God’s goodness (following him all the days of his life): people will feel like our goodness is hot on their heels, pursuing and overtaking them. People will experience our goodness as generosity; they see that we’re committed to blessing their lives (because we are!). Our goodness is an expression of the goodness of God we’ve experienced.

Let's consider one more example of the type of goodness we're supposed to show others. In Galatians 5 Paul writes that the fruit of the Spirit includes goodness. In Galatians 6 he talks about this goodness spilling over into doing good to others:

9 Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary. 10 So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith.

I think that Paul's challenge here reflects the perspective that we not only do good for those closest to us (those who are of the household of faith); we also "do good to all people." In other words, we don't put limits on who might be the recipient of our good deeds. As humans we have a finite amount of time and energy and resources; but we are open to the possibility that some of our goodness should spill over into the lives of all types of people. This reflects the goodness and generosity of God. Paul encouraged the Galatians to "not lose heart in doing good" - not getting tired of doing good works - because eventually their efforts would bear fruit.

We believe that God wants us to excel in good works - both within the church and to "all people" in our community. Our conviction is that Faith doesn't exist exclusively for those who are already here. We believe that God has placed us here in Manhattan so that we can bless this community and this area. We take seriously Scriptures like this that tell us, "while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people." Our goodness should spill over into good works that we do for "all people" in our community.

I am part of a small team here at Faith that is praying and dreaming about ways that we as a church can excel in doing good works in our community. This team will encourage and resource and organize efforts in the community. We're not wanting to "reinvent the wheel"; we'd love to partner with and bless organizations that are already doing effective work in and around Manhattan. And we realize that many of you are already serving in significant ways. The first thing we are going to do is a simple survey (2 Sundays from now) to find out what you are already doing in the community: volunteering or serving on the board of an organization, coaching sports teams, . Then we want to figure out a way to invite others into those good works that you're already doing. As well we want to provide some specific all-church opportunities to bless our community - whether it's doing house repairs in a neighborhood or a work project at a local school. Our vision is for the goodness of God to overflow from our lives into good works for others in this area. This is important for the good that we do, but it's also important for our own maturity. When we keep in step with the Spirit, we progressively exhibit goodness to others.

That's what we're going for as a church. And it all begins with our experience of the goodness of God.