

FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT- GOODNESS

Text: Matthew 19:16-26, Romans 7:14-25; Galatians 5:22&23

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A minister was leaving a place after having made a visit. The folk said 'Goodbye. And be good!' To which he replied 'Hey, that's my job. As a minister it's hard to be anything else.' That's the thing isn't it? As I heard one old Reformed minister put it once 'I am paid to be good and the congregation is good for nothing'. That's the trouble with words. They can at times be hard to pin down in meaning. Take the word 'good'. If a little girl behaves well, her mother will say 'Good, girl'. When things have gone well we will say 'It was a good day.' If we enjoyed the movie we saw we will say it was a 'good movie'. And if we have been inspired in worship then it was a 'good service'. In each case we are talking about very different things. But we get the idea that 'good' refers to doing things in the right way, things that are pleasing, things that get our approval. The Hebrew word for good, 'tov', means 'that which is pleasant, joyful, agreeable'. That which 'gratifies the senses, it is delightful, delicious, sweet'. By extension it includes 'that which is morally satisfying and right.' The Greek word for 'good', 'agathos', describes that which is 'fit, capable, useful, what is right'. It refers to the quality of something that is 'excellent'. Now the big question is, how do we determine that something is good, excellent, agreeable, right? What constitutes 'goodness'? We see that 'goodness' is the sixth fruit of the Spirit, but what is it? How does 'goodness' express itself?

This is a debate that has a long history. The ancient Greeks loved to talk and philosophise. One of the key issues they debated was the matter of 'What is good?' For Plato it was the central issue. Plato said that the really 'real things' were the 'eternal ideals' that always exist. And in our daily life we strive to find and reach those ideals. The most important thing was to find the 'supreme good'. Later philosophers challenged Plato and said that good is not out there as an ideal. Good is what we determine from our experience. One group saw 'good' as the experience of pleasure

and the removal of pain. Others said, no, ignorance is the problem. You discover the good life through education and knowledge. Others said good is a very practical thing. You do to others as you want them to do for you. Another ancient concept said good is 'the greatest benefit for the greatest number'. And finally there was a group that insisted good has to do with 'goodies'. The more you have the better life is.

Now why am I outlining these ancient views on what constitutes 'goodness'? Well, because these views are the driving force behind so much of what happens in our communities. Australia is not Christendom where all things are done from Christian principles. We are back in the days like the ancient Greeks. We are a post-modern, multicultural society, where we have all sorts of ideas and religions and cultures all rolled into one place. And the driving forces as to what constitutes 'good' are the same as the ancient ideas. How do we determine legislation? By the majority vote; 'the greatest benefit for the greatest number'. How do we determine what is good? By what is acceptable to the majority of the people at the time. Why have standards changed on what is seen and heard on television? Because we have changed in our views of what is good and acceptable. What is the driving force for what is the 'good life'? The more things you have the better life will be. How do we decide if something is 'good'? If it feels good. As the song goes, 'How can it be wrong, when it feels so right?' Now, if my pleasure determines what is good, then anything that causes me displeasure is bad. So if my marriage is causing tension and unhappiness I owe it to myself to get out. This kind of thinking is constantly influencing us as Christians. Very often we think the same way. Which means we have a big challenge in front of us. So, all of a sudden, this innocuous word 'good' takes on a much larger standing in our lives. It is very important to know 'What is good?'

We get a clue from Jesus in Matthew 19 in the incident with the rich young man. He came up to Jesus and asked, "*Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?*" To which Jesus replied "*Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only One who is good.*" Why did Jesus answer the young man that way? Because he needed to remove the misconception that we as human beings, on our own without the grace of God, can know what good is and can do good. Paul is very blunt in Romans 3:12 when he quotes the Psalms "*All have turned away, they have together become worthless, there is no one who does good, not even one*". To understand what is good we must come to know God. For, as Psalm 100:5 puts it "*The Lord is good and his*

love endures forever; his faithfulness continues for all generations." The focus here is that God himself is good. He is 'goodness'. Notice what is being said. It is not the case of us describing God, that he is good. It is the case of God describing what goodness is. God is himself the ideal. He is absolute perfection and bliss in and of himself. There is such an absolute perfection in God's nature that nothing is wanting or defective in him. Nothing can be added to make him better. Augustine said that God is 'SUMMUM BONUM' – 'the highest good'. God is not only the greatest of all beings. He is the best. God himself is what we measure everything else by. He is the standard. He is good.

So what is involved with the goodness of God? In Exodus 33:19 God said to Moses "*I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you and I will proclaim my Name, the Lord, in your presence.*" Then in 34:6 we read "*And he passed in front of Moses proclaiming 'The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin...'*" Did you notice the list of perfections here? Compassion, grace, patience, love. These things together make up God's goodness. A theologian said: 'we speak of something as good, when it is ideal in all its parts... and God is in every way all that he as God should be and is.' Now what is at the heart of this cluster of excellencies? What typifies God's goodness is generosity. Generosity means to give to others with a big heart. That is what compassion, grace, patience and love are about. Being big hearted. Not to give to get. Not limited by what others deserve. But to consistently give in abundance. Augustine said God is 'ULTRO BONUS'- 'abundant in goodness'. The Belgic Confession says that God is "*...good and the overflowing source of all good.*" God's generosity, his goodness, is demonstrated in his creating. He wanted to share of himself, his life and his love with others. Now, because God is good, whatever he does is good. Think of the beautiful rhythm in the creation story in Genesis. "*God said let there be... and it was so... and it was good.*" The whole creation is an obedient response to the Word of God. And in that obedience God saw it all and it was "*very good*". God took great delight and pleasure in what he had made. We see also God's generosity in that he has made such an abundance of animals and plants in vast array, spectacular mountain ranges, astonishing galaxies and a universe that goes on and on. God is indeed "*good and the overflowing source of all good.*"

So we see that God himself is good. Everything he made is an expression of his 'goodness'. God is the standard, and everything is good when it conforms to the will of God. Now that gives us the clue as to how we determine what is good. We do 'good' when we, like the creation, are obedient to God. So our understanding is radically different to the culture in which we live. In our communities good is often what the individual feels it is. But we recognise that good is what God says it is. God reserves for himself to determine what is good. That's the issue behind the tree in the Garden of Eden that Adam and Eve were not to eat from, the "*tree of good and evil*". What made the tree different from the vast variety of trees in the garden? Nothing we are aware of. The distinction was made by what God commanded. When Adam and Eve fell into sin they discovered too late that good is knowing and doing what God says. Evil is not doing God's will. When we have come to know God again through Jesus the first thing we are called back to is doing God's will. Paul writes in Romans 12:1&2 "*In view of God's mercy, offer yourselves as living sacrifices holy and pleasing to God which is your spiritual worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve God's will- his good, pleasing and perfect will.*"

Doing what God says is the key thing when it comes to doing good as far as God is concerned. When you do a word study in the Old Testament on the word 'tov', 'good', we see that it describes what God has done for Israel. It describes what God will do for his people in the future. And how they are to behave in the mean time. In Exodus 18:34 we read "*Jethro was delighted to hear about all the good the Lord had done for Israel in rescuing them from the land of the Egyptians.*" In Jeremiah 32:34 we read, as God promised deliverance "*I will bring upon them all the good.*" And in the mean time Micah showed how the people were to behave (6:8) "*He has shown you what is good, namely to do justice, love kindness and to walk humbly with your God.*" The Psalmist teaches that what God says is good. "*Your laws are good...How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth.*"(Psalm 119:39, 103). You see there that what is good is delightful and pleasurable as well. God's law is not just a drudge. It is good in the sense of morally good and excellent. And also in the sense of good as a delightful thing. The Heidelberg Catechism summarises well the idea of what is good. It asks in Q91 "*What do we do that is good? Only that which arise out of true faith, conforms to God's law and is done for His glory; and not that which is based on what we think is right or on established human tradition.*"

Now for us to experience the fruit of '*goodness*' in our lives we must have a living relationship with God through Jesus. As Paul writes in Ephesians 2 "*God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ, when we were dead in transgressions. It is by grace you have been saved... not by works so no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works...*" Because of the death and resurrection of Jesus, we who believe are declared forgiven. We are right with God. In other words, we are legally good before God. Because of that, the Holy Spirit resides in us to stimulate us on to "*good works.*" And we do good when we do what God says. God, and what he says, is the standard. But that is not easy. The inner battle is still going on. Paul says "*I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do, no the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing.*" There is certainly a struggle, as you and I know. It is so easy to just fall into line with the rest of the culture around us in what it says is good. But it's not all doom and gloom. The Spirit, who produces the fruit, keeps stimulating us and spurring us on to do things by God's standards. He keeps encouraging us to look at God's Word, to follow God's ways. And I think that for 99% of the time what God's Word says is very clear. We don't follow our feelings, we simply do what the Bible says. That is the good.

Often what we need to do is as Paul wrote (Romans 12:9) "*Hate what is evil; cling to what is good... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*" There are things that are obviously evil, and we are repulsed just by the thought. But there are many things that look appealing and we can easily go along. What we need to do is "*...cling to what is good.*" Clinging to the good is like hanging onto a life rope when you're drowning. You just hang on for life and don't let go. You know what God's Word says and you just do it. You cling to it. Perhaps you are bored with your spiritual life. Being committed to the church doesn't seem to do anything for you. Your marriage is disappointing. "*Clinging to the good*" is holding on through disappointment, persevering when you are discouraged. You just do God's will even if it doesn't seem much fun. Why? Because it is right and good. Because "*...your light shines before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your father in heaven.*" Do you want to bring hope to people in the hills, including yourself. Be generous. Be bighearted. Be good. It may seem hard to do things God's way. But eventually you will find that God's ways really are good. Not only in the sense of being

morally right, but also in the sense of being delightful, sweet to the mouth, pleasurable. If God is good, and the whole of creation is good as an expression of his goodness, then when we follow God's ways, we have found the best way. We have found the good life. And letting others see that and discover it as well is a good thing to do.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

These questions can be followed up personally, with a Christian friend, in your small groups, or in discussion after the service. Reflection is important because too often we hear a good sermon and soon forget it without actually growing spiritually or changing in attitude or what we do. The reflection questions are meant to be challenging, because our spiritual growth and the salvation of others is so important.

- What does the Bible mean when it speaks of 'good'? Define 'goodness' as a fruit of the Spirit?
- How do we determine what is good? Compare some of the views on what is good in our culture with what God says is good.
- How do you go about developing 'goodness' in your life? What will you do?