

## “The Fruit of the Spirit: Goodness”

(Galatians 5.22-23a)

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The fruit of the Spirit is ... goodness. At least, according to most of the Bible translations. A handful of translations, including some important ones, say “generosity” instead of “goodness.” That’s a pretty significant difference in wording – you and I both know that “generosity” and “goodness” are not the same thing. When I first learned the nine fruits of the Spirit, I learned “generosity,” because that’s what my trusty, reliable New Revised Standard Version said. And there’s no question that “generosity” is a virtue; indeed, generosity flows out of our hearts as a result of the work of the Holy Spirit inside us, so you could make an argument that “generosity” belongs in this hallowed list of nine ... but, I have to tell you, the Greek word clearly means “goodness,” not “generosity.” It’s the normal Greek word for “good,” with a suffix at the end, which turns it from an adjective into a noun, the same way we turn “good” into “goodness” by adding a suffix. It does not change the fundamental meaning of the word. “Goodness” refers to *the quality or state of being good*, to borrow Merriam-Webster’s definition. Generosity might be part of that, but to limit the word to generosity alone is definitely *not* what Paul had in mind when he wrote these words. He meant *goodness*. *The quality or state of being good*.

It appears that the biblical writers invented this word, “goodness.” The word that Paul uses here never appears in classical Greek; its first appearance is in the pages of the Bible itself. The adjective “good” had been around for centuries, but the noun “goodness” – that was new.

The word “goodness” appears four times in the New Testament. The other three passages are:

- I myself feel confident about you, my brothers and sisters, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able to instruct one another. (Romans 15:14)
- Walk as children of light, for the fruit of light is in all goodness and righteousness and truth. (Ephesians 5:8-9)
- For this purpose we always pray for you, that our God will make you worthy of his call, and may fulfill every desire of goodness and work of faith in power. (2 Thessalonians 1:11)

I find it interesting that these passages clearly seem to refer to *our* goodness, the goodness we have through Jesus Christ. There’s no mention of the “goodness of God” – though of course God *is* good, all the time. But what does *goodness* look like? What does it mean to “be good”?

There are a handful of people in the New Testament who are described as being “good.” One,

of course, is Jesus (Mark 10:17), but Jesus reminds us that “no one is good but God alone.” (Mark 10:18) Goodness is *relative*; none of us is as good as *God*; that’s a given. But there are some people whom the New Testament writers describe as “good.” Joseph of Arimathea is one; he is the Jewish leader who asked for the body of Jesus so he could bury it. We are told he was a “good and righteous man.” (Luke 23:50) There was a woman named Tabitha; she was a disciple who was “devoted to good works and acts of charity.” (Acts 9:36) And there was the disciple named Barnabas, a former Jewish priest who had converted to Christianity; he became one of Paul’s companions and a very successful evangelist. Luke tells us he was “a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith.” (Acts 11:24) Righteousness, acts of charity, being “full of the Holy Spirit and of faith” – these things are all related to *goodness*.

That’s all I’ve found – only three specific people in the New Testament (other than Jesus) who are called “good.” Goodness, evidently, is a relatively *rare* phenomenon. There aren’t that many people who the Bible calls “good.” Oh, sure – there are plenty of people who do good deeds, perform acts of charity, are generous with their time and money and resources – but *goodness* has to do with the *whole* of a person’s life. You can do good deeds, acts of charity, be generous, and still do lots of things that are not-so-good. Even Paul admits that he struggles with this: “I do not do what I want,” he says, “but the very thing I hate.... I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.” (Romans 7:15, 19) Paul struggled with temptation – and he’s honest enough to admit it. Who can’t relate to that?

So it’s no accident that, in various places, the New Testament writers *encourage* and *exhort* us Christian believers to *do* good, to *be* good: “Hate what is evil; hold fast to what is good.” (Romans 12:9) “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” (Romans 12:21) “See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all.” (1 Thessalonians 5:15) Goodness, of course, is the opposite of evil; Jesus reminds us that “The good man out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil man out of his evil treasure brings forth evil.” (Matthew 12:35) Sometimes it sounds like people are wholly one or wholly the other – but you and I both know that’s a simplistic understanding; it’s *so* much more complicated than that; *you and I* are more complicated than that. So Paul says, “Lead a life worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.” (Colossians 1:10) The New Testament is inviting us to lead lives that manifest and display more and more *goodness* as we grow in the ways of Jesus.

But how do we do that? How do we *grow in goodness*? Well, first of all, we need to know what’s *good*. We need to be able to distinguish between what’s good, what’s evil, and what we *think* is good but really isn’t. But who gets to *define* what is good? Is it us? Is it our church? Is it our society? Our parents? Our culture? Hollywood? What about our political leaders? Who has the right to *tell* us what is good? The right to *define goodness*? For us Christians, there is only one answer: *GOD*. The God who fully revealed himself to us in Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. We are to serve no other god, listen to no other god, follow no other god. That is first, and fundamental. *GOD* defines what is good.

So, then, we need to be listening to what God says. Jesus Christ is the Word of God incarnate; the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the Word of God written. That is also fundamental, and foundational; no Christian church worthy of the name says anything other than that. So we need to know Jesus’ teachings; we need to know what the Bible has to say about all sorts of

different subjects. That requires study. It also requires interpretation, because as even the New Testament writers knew, some parts of the scriptures are “difficult to understand,” which “the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction.” (2 Peter 3:16) What are we to do? You can look at different translations; the Bible wasn’t written in English; there are literally *dozens* of different translations. Some are better than others. *None* are perfect. There are times when I want to take a red pen and scratch out some words or phrases and replace them with others, because there are times when a translation is just *wrong*. Like saying “generosity” when it really should say “goodness.” Do not make the mistake of trusting just *one* translation, and do not make the mistake of just picking and choosing which one *you* like best whenever there’s a significant difference between different translations. We need to do a bit more work than that. There are all sorts of Christians through the centuries who have written useful commentaries. If you’re not sure where to start, try William Barclay; he’s covered the whole Bible, and his books are sound, reliable, and easy to read. Or Eugene Peterson, the most well-known author in our denomination, author of *The Message* and many other books, who just died last week, and I thank God for his life and ministry and faithful witness to me and to many. There are people who can truly *help you understand* the Bible, and what *God* defines as “good.”

Next: talk with other Christians who are sincere about their desire to follow Jesus. Come to classes; go to discussion groups. Don’t just rely on what you learned in Sunday School when you were a kid, because that is nowhere near adequate for an *adult* walk of faith. There is something rich and wonderful that happens when Christians talk about scripture together. You hear different perspectives and interpretations. You *learn* from talking with people who see things differently. In the discussion, *both* of you may learn something new; *both* of you may start to see things differently. That’s called *growth*. Too many Christians never talk about the meaning of these all-important books with other people; they stay stuck in their own opinions and interpretations; they don’t grow, they don’t develop, they don’t mature. I’ve been a pastor for 15 years; I have been struck time and again by how often people don’t *really* learn, don’t *really* grow; how often people justify their actions with flimsy excuses; how often people live in self-denial of the things they do that aren’t *good* in the sight of the Lord. It saddens me. God wants us to be *better* than this. The more we *talk* about the intersection between scripture and life, the more we understand what is truly *good* – and not good – in the eyes of the Lord. I think we can grow more from *talking* than we do from listening to a 15-minute monologue once a week.

The final, critical piece of all this is *prayer*. Real, honest prayer. Praying for guidance, praying for wisdom, praying for the strength and the courage to do the *right* thing when your natural instinct or the people around you are telling you to do something other than that. Praying for *forgiveness*, when you have crossed a line. Praying for *healing*, if there’s a wounded part of your soul that is the root cause of some of your actions and behaviors. Praying for the ability to endure and withstand temptation. Praying that God will continually reveal his will to you, and for the capacity to actually *do* God’s will.

*Goodness* is a fruit of the Holy Spirit, working within us. That doesn’t just *happen*. We have to *invite* the Spirit in. We have to *pursue* growth in goodness. We have to do the things that we can do that make it easier for the Holy Spirit to work, to help us *grow*, to make us *more good*, more of the time.

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