

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, February 13, 2022**

**THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT #6: GOODNESS
FOR GOODNESS SAKE
Galatians 6:1-10**

“The fruit of the Spirit,” say it with me, “is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23).

Today we consider the spiritual fruit of *goodness*. For some biblical perspective, I invite you to turn to Galatians 6:1-10 and follow along as I read. This is the passage of Scripture that immediately follows Paul’s naming of these nine varieties of the fruit of the Spirit, and his appeal to the Galatian Christians (and to us) to “keep in step with the Spirit” and to not allow any divisive or contentious spirit, any envy, pride, or conceit to infiltrate or poison either their hearts or their fellowship.

Let’s give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God’s Word as we find it in Galatians 6:1-10.

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When the elders and deacons of our church met together a couple weeks ago, I pointed out that the word “good” appears 601 times in the New International Version (NIV) of the Bible, including 58 times in the Book of Psalms, which speaks often of God’s goodness. The main Old Testament word for “good” is the Hebrew word *tov*. In the New Testament, there are two Greek words that are usually translated “good”: *kalos* and *agathos*. Would you believe that both words occur exactly 102 times in the New Testament?

Of course, the word “good,” as a descriptive term, may have different shades of meaning.

- A good job, for example, is a quality effort, a task well done and worthy of praise. So, we say: “Good job!” to our kids when they clean their rooms or get a good grade on a report or test.
- Or, when we talk about a good job, we may mean a position that is challenging (in a good way) and rewarding, a job that contributes something useful to society, or that pays well.
- A good game is one that is competitive and well-played and keeps our interest to the end. As in, “I hope the Super Bowl today will be a good game.”
- Staying with football, when the announcer says: “The kick is good!”, it means that the ball sailed over the cross bar between the uprights of the goal post for a field goal or an extra point after a touchdown.

- Good food, from one point of view, is simply food that tastes good. It's food I like. Or it may refer to food that is good *for* me. The problem is that sometimes the food that tastes good *to* me and the food that is good *for* me are in mutually exclusive categories. Know what I mean?
- A good book is one with a captivating story, characters that come alive, and a message that is true and redemptive.
- Then, of course, there is the matter of a good sermon. Some people tell their pastor it was a good sermon just to be polite. They think it is the thing you're supposed to say, whether you mean it or not. (I know none of you would ever say that unless you really meant it!) In calling a sermon "good," someone might mean it was interesting or entertaining, and kept me from falling asleep. Or someone might say: "That was a good sermon, Pastor. I know someone who really needed to hear that today!" Or maybe it means: "You know, Pastor, God spoke to me through your sermon today. It was what *I* needed to hear. You hit me right between the eyes."

The point is that the word "good" can mean a variety of things in a variety of contexts. It may mean enjoyable or desirable or appealing or attractive. It may mean honorable or noble or useful or beneficial or blessed. It may refer to what is morally right. In an ultimate sense, it refers to what is morally perfect, without any fault or failure or sin to tarnish one's record. At least one major figure in church history, John Wesley, believed in moral perfectionism. He believed it was possible to attain moral perfection in this life, to arrive at a place where you no longer fell prey to sin of any kind. He not only believed moral perfection to be possible, he believed he had attained it. If he did, he was the only person who ever lived, not counting Jesus, to achieve a state of perfection. But I'm willing to bet my life that Wesley was mistaken both in what he believed about perfection and in his assessment of his own virtue. The Bible is clear: None of us is perfect. None of us will ever attain moral perfection in this life. In and through Christ, we are redeemed. We are forgiven. We become new creatures in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17). God has begun a "good work" in us that He will bring to completion on the day of Christ's return (Philippians 1:6). But as long as we live in these mortal human bodies, our sanctification – the process of becoming holy – remains incomplete.

In an ultimate sense, in an absolute moral sense, only God is good.

THE GOODNESS OF GOD

Three of the four Gospels in the New Testament (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) tell the story of the rich young man who came running to Jesus with a spiritual question. From a human perspective, this young man had everything going for him. He was financially secure, he had a good reputation, he was well-respected, he was careful to live a morally upright life, he understood that there is a spiritual dimension to life. From all outward appearances, he was the kind of person every church would love to have as a member.

He wanted to know what he needed to do to inherit eternal life. (Mark 10:17). He wanted to know how he could be sure he was going to heaven. It is a great question, a question you neglect at your peril.

One of the things that strikes me in this story is the way this young man addresses Jesus, and the way Jesus responds to him. When he comes to Jesus, he calls Him “Good Teacher” (10:17). To which Jesus responds: “Why do you call me ‘good’? No one is good – except God alone” (10:18).

Jesus was not denying His own goodness. He was challenging this young man to think through the implications of the words he used, because words have meaning. If you affirm that Jesus is good in an ultimate sense, you are affirming that Jesus is more than just a man, more than just a good or godly man. You are affirming that Jesus is Himself God, because only God is truly and wholly good.

Not only did Jesus confront this young man to consider who He (Jesus) really is, He also exposed the young man’s misplaced confidence in his own goodness. Like so many people in the world today and throughout history, this young man mistakenly thought that living a good life was good enough to guarantee a place in heaven. But no amount of good works will get you – or anyone – to heaven. The Bible says it is by grace (and grace alone) that we are saved, through faith (which is itself a gift from God), not by good works, so that no one has any grounds for boasting (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Only God can lay claim to being truly and wholly good. Only God.

Because God is good, everything He does is good. His creation is good. Six times in Genesis 1 God looks at what He has made and pronounces it “good” (1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25). A seventh time, after His creation of humankind, God declares all that He has made not just “good” but “very good” (1:31).

God’s Word is good, too. What God says and commands is good. In Psalm 19 David says:

“The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul.
The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple.
The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart.
The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes.
The decrees of the Lord are sure and altogether righteous.”
(19:7-8, 9b)

Psalm 119 says:

“The unfolding of Your words gives light;
it gives understanding to the simple” (119:130).

And this:

“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path” (119: 105).

Not only is God’s Word good. So is His will. Paul says in Romans 12:2 that we are to conform no longer to the patterns and ways of this world; we are not to let the world squeeze us into its mold; we are instead to be transformed from the inside out, so that we will be able to test and approve God’s will, which is good, pleasing, and perfect.

The will of God for your life may not always be easy. But it is always good.

God’s creation is good. His Word is good. His will is good. So are His plans. Through the prophet Jeremiah, God said to His covenant people at a low point in their history: “I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future” (Jeremiah 29:11).

What was true then is true now. God has a plan for your life and mine. And it is good. Because God is good.

To say that God is good is to say that goodness is an attribute of God. To put it in anthropomorphic terms, it is part of the DNA of who God is.

The goodness of God is a recurring refrain throughout the Old Testament, especially the Psalms.

Psalms 34:8: “Taste and see that the Lord is *good*; blessed are those who take refuge in Him.”

Psalms 100:4b-5a: “Give thanks to Him and praise His name. For the Lord is *good* and His love endures forever.”

Psalms 145:9: “The Lord is *good* to all; He has compassion on all He has made.”

Jesus points to the goodness of God when He says in the Sermon on the Mount that the Father causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good alike, and He sends rain on both the righteous and the unrighteous (Matthew 5:45). This goodness is an expression of what theologians call God’s “common grace.” It is grace that touches every life. Grace, of course, is a gift that comes free of charge to people who don’t deserve it and never will. Grace in all its forms, whether common grace or the grace He bestows only on His elect, is an expression of God’s goodness.

God is *good*. All the time. In every situation. In all things, as it says in Romans 8:28, He works for good in the lives of those who love Him and have been called according to His saving purpose. You may not know exactly what God is up to in your life at any given moment, but I promise you it is good. Because *God. Is. Good.* All the time.

Goodness, though, is not an attribute of unredeemed human nature. People are not intrinsically good, despite what many people want to believe. I'm not saying that people are incapable of doing good things. Even Hitler probably loved his mother. But the idea that people are innately, inherently good is a myth that contradicts both biblical teaching and human experience. As my geometry teacher, Mr. O'Neil, used to say, it is intuitively obvious to the most casual observer.

Goodness does not come naturally to us. The goodness that God desires us to cultivate is the result of His gracious work in us. It is the fruit of the indwelling Holy Spirit in our lives. Like self-control, gentleness, faithfulness, and every other variety of spiritual fruit, goodness is evidence of the imprint of God's Spirit in your life and mine.

CALLED TO DO GOOD

As a follower of Jesus, you are called to do good – to live a life characterized by goodness – as an expression of the change that has taken place in your heart through the power of the gospel and the gracious work of the Holy Spirit. Jesus tells us that good deeds will flow from a heart redeemed and renewed by His grace. In Luke 6:45 He says: “The good person brings good things out of the good stored up in his/her heart, and the evil person brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his/her heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.”

Goodness in speech and in action flows from a heart changed by God's grace. Having given us a new heart, what God wants for us is to “bear fruit in every good work” (Colossians 1:10). The fruit of good works gives God pleasure. In fact, it is what you and I were made for. As we have already said, we are not saved by good works. We are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. But we are saved *for* good works. Ephesians 2:10 says that we are “God's workmanship” – His *poiema*, His handiwork, His work of art, His masterpiece, if you will – “created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”

What were we made for? In and through Christ we were made to do good works that reflect the character of God, that demonstrate His grace and goodness and bring glory to His name. Our good deeds are not to be done to bring attention or glory to ourselves. No. Remember the words of Jesus: “Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and” – what? – “glorify your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16).

Soli Deo Gloria. To God alone be the glory.

The word *agathosune* (goodness) occurs only four times in the New Testament. But the call to goodness in action permeates the Bible. Here is Micah 6:8, for example: “He (the Lord) has shown you ... what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.” This is a picture of what goodness looks like.

Apart from Jesus Himself, the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37) is probably the best-known illustration of goodness in the Bible. We call the Samaritan “good” because of the charity and compassion he demonstrated and the personal sacrifices of time, effort, and

money he made to care for a stranger who had been beaten and robbed and left in a ditch. Unlike the religious professionals – the priest and Levite – who apparently suffered from the tyranny of the urgent (on their way to important appointments, perhaps), or maybe they suffered from EDD (Empathy Deficit Disorder), the Samaritan exhibited the quality of goodness in action to aid a person in need. For this his example will be lifted up until the end of time. This, too, is a picture of what goodness looks like. The story of the Good Samaritan reminds us not only of our responsibility to care for the needy, it also shows that we don't always get to *choose* the person or persons who need our help.

Paul gives us some insight into the nature of the spiritual fruit of goodness in Galatians 6. One way to put goodness into action is in how we treat a sister or brother in Christ who has fallen into sin of some kind. Our aim, says Paul in verse 1, must be to restore them in a spirit of gentleness (another fruit of the Spirit), recognizing that there, but for the grace of God, go we. Thomas a Kempis, the 15th-century theologian best known for his devotional classic *The Imitation of Christ* said: "If you see another stumble or fall, let your first thought be that, of all people, you are most likely to stumble or fall in the same manner." *The Message* paraphrases verse 1 this way: "If someone falls into sin, forgivingly restore them, saving your critical comments for yourself. *You* might be needing forgiveness before the day is out." None of us is immune to temptation or sin.

A second way to put goodness into action, says Paul, is to "bear one another's burdens" (6:2). The assumptions underlying this exhortation are:

- 1) We all have burdens; we all have "stuff" we carry around with us; we all face problems and heartaches and disappointments.
- 2) God doesn't intend for us to carry all the burdens of life alone, though some people try to do so.
- 3) When we come alongside one another and help to carry each other's burdens, we fulfill the law of Christ, which, of course, is to love one another as He has loved us (John 13:34).

Goodness in action, in other words, is an expression of love, which is #1 on the hit parade of the fruit of the Spirit. When you care for someone who is going through a hard season in life, you exhibit the spiritual fruit of goodness.

Paul sums it up in verses 9 and 10, where he urges us not to become weary in doing good (*kalos*), knowing that in God's time (*kairos*) we will reap a good harvest if we don't give up, or quit. Therefore, he says, whenever we have the opportunity, we should do good (*agathos*) to everyone we can, starting with the community of believers. Starting with each other in the body of Christ.

The church is where it starts. But not where it ends. It starts with doing good in our relationships with one another. But it doesn't end here. If we're going to be like Jesus, we've got to put goodness into action to bless our neighbors, whoever and wherever they are. The

scope of this exhortation is “all people.” In big things. In small things. When it is easy. When it is not so easy. Whenever we have the opportunity.

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I will wrap it up with this. You may have heard it before.

People are unreasonable, illogical, and self-centered. Love them anyway.

If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish ulterior motives. Be kind anyway.
The good you do today may be forgotten tomorrow. Be good anyway.

Being honest will make you vulnerable. Be honest anyway.

What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight. Build anyway.

People need help but may attack you if you try to help them. Help them anyway.

In the final analysis, it is between you and God. It was never between you and them anyway.

(Adapted from Kent M. Keith, “the Paradoxical Commandments,” 1968.)

The fruit of the Spirit is goodness. You are never more like God than when, out of love, you do good to others. So, whenever you have the opportunity, put the fruit of goodness to work in action.

Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory and honor of Your name. Amen.