

The Fruit of the Spirit (7): Goodness

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Date: 16 August 2020

Preacher: Colin Dow

[0 : 00] Galatians 5 and verse 22, we read these words. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness.

Goodness. Well, by far, goodness is the hardest fruit of the Spirit to define and describe. We use the word good in a hundred thousand different ways. But what's important is how the Bible uses it, and especially in our context, how the Apostle Paul uses it.

As a result, I have spent more time studying for this one sermon, weeks, than I have spent studying for any other sermon during my time here in Glasgow City Free Church.

After all, what is good? Does it correspond to our behavior? To beauty? To morality?

[1 : 17] What is good? Let me tell you that sometimes, no often, what seems to be the simplest of all subjects turns out to be the most complicated.

So, for example, it is easy to say that Jesus died for our sins. Even the youngest of children say that. But what does that really mean?

Jesus died for our sins. Or let's take it another way. The simplest object I use on a daily basis is a pencil. I challenge you.

If a pencil really is the simplest object we use, go and make one for yourself and show me it tomorrow. What we do know is that love is good.

And joy is good. And peace is good. And patience is good. And kindness is good. And gentleness is good. And so on. And yet, although goodness is connected to each one of these things, it is distinct in its own right.

[2 : 21] We also know that just as God is love and joy and peace and patience, so God is good. To go even deeper, bearing in mind that what we have consistently said is that all these fruit of the Spirit find their source in the relationship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit within the Godhead, there is something about goodness which can only be located in the Trinity itself.

That the Father is good. That the Son is good to God. That the Father is good to God. That the Father is good to the Son, that the Son is good to the Spirit, and the Spirit is good to the Father, and so on. Well, I thought maybe we should just stick to the standard understanding of what we think goodness means.

Moral excellence. God is morally excellent in that he never does anything wrong for us to demonstrate goodness as the fruit of the spirit means that that we strive for moral perfection and certainly when I was beginning my study on this subject that's what I thought goodness must mean moral perfection but that can't be right because if it's true that goodness means moral perfection then what is the purpose of the other fruit of the spirit after all according to Jesus actually love is moral perfection Jesus said that love is the summary of the law and the one who loves perfectly keeps the law at all points perfectly no goodness must mean something else so let me tell you that I wrestled with this and I thought through this and I studied books about this and I prayed through this I even spoke with Kathman about this and I want to suggest that it's all led to this definition of goodness a definition I'm adapting from the southern theologian Robert Louis Dabney goodness is working for the well-being of others let me say that again goodness is working for the well-being of others that it seems to me comes closest to the New Testament and especially to the Pauline understanding of what it means to be good to work for the well-being of others so having defined goodness I want to describe it in two ways goodness and God and goodness and others now as with all the other fruit of the spirit this is a huge subject and the problem isn't finding enough material in scripture but but given time restraints limiting our studies to the main points this it seems to me is the main point of goodness working for the well-being of others first of all then goodness and God goodness and God when approached by the rich young ruler and called good teacher

Jesus replied why do you call me good there is no one good except God alone in Psalm 25 verse 8 we read the words good and upright is the Lord God is the spring of all good the Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck wrote God is the sum total of all perfections God is the sum total of all perfections and Bavinck here is referring to the absolute goodness the pure goodness the infinite goodness of God there is there is nothing in God which is less than infinitely purely and absolutely good if there is anything in this world which is good it comes from him and not from the world itself all that is good in our world is a reflection of God's goodness even as the mighty waters of a river find their source in streams which run down from the hills in the first instance

[6 : 52] God is good in himself God is good in himself as I referred to earlier I want you to put the thinking caps on for a second as I referred to earlier all of these virtues which make up the fruit of the spirit find their origins and source in God himself not so much in what God does but in who God is and when I talk about God I'm referring to him as one God Father Son and Holy Spirit in recent years Christian theologians have refreshed their understandings of the doctrine of the Trinity of how God is one and God is three that to use St. Augustine's famous quote I think it was St. Augustine it may be St. Athanasius we cannot think of the one without thinking of the three and we cannot think of the three without thinking of the one so it's good for us here in Glasgow City to stretch our minds from time to time see there's me using that word good again without even thinking it's good for us to stretch our minds well the fruit of the spirit are expressions of the inner Trinitarian relationships within God himself the father loves his son and the son rejoices in the Holy Spirit and the spirit lives at perfect peace with the father and so on and so forth

I hope we can understand this at even the most basic level if God was not Trinity he could not be loved because he would have no one to love he could not be patient because he would have no one with whom to be patient he could not be good because he would have no one to be good to so God is one and God is three meaning that all these fruit of the spirit find their origin and source in God himself father son and Holy Spirit so let's go back to the fruit of the spirit and the definition of goodness as working for the well-being of others in what sense therefore can we say that God is absolute pure and infinite goodness in and of himself we say it in this sense within those inner Trinitarian relationships everything the father does is for the well-being of his son and everything the son does is for the well-being of his father and everything the father does is for the well-being of his spirit and everything the spirit does is for the well-being of the son and so on each person of the Godhead has this as primary the well-being of the other person

Now before you think I'm going all weird and wacky here, this is standard reform teaching as expounded by Donald MacLeod in his book Shared Life, written 30 years ago.

And more lately by Michael Reeves, who views every aspect of the Christian life and especially church ethics through the spectacles of the Trinity. We could go even further back and talk about John Owen and his masterful book, Communion with God.

The point is this, God is absolute goodness because he is three in one. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

[10 : 48] And the highest goodness of the Father consists in the well-being of his Son. And the highest goodness of the Holy Spirit consists in the well-being of the Father.

From the ages of eternity, hidden entirely from our view, the Father has been working for the well-being of his Son. The Son he loves.

The Son with whom he's at peace. The Son with whom he's patient. The Son to whom he is kind.

The Son in whom he rejoices. Everything God the Father does is with a view to the well-being of his eternally beloved Son.

So this is how we can say that God is the sum of all perfections as Bavinck does. Because as one God in three persons, he exists in essence for the well-being of the other.

But not only is God good in himself, we want to insist that God is good to us. God is good to us.

Psalm 145 verse 9.

[12 : 04] The Lord is good to all. It is not within the nature of God to be anything less than good. He exists in his essence for the well-being of the other.

So the goodness he shows to his creation is the overflow of the goodness of his own nature. He is good to the world because the Father exists for the well-being of the Holy Spirit.

And the Holy Spirit exists for the well-being of the Son. That's why God gives breath to the righteous and the unrighteous alike. Why he causes the sun to rise in all creation.

And why God gives bountiful harvests even to the wicked. God is good because it is in his nature to work for the well-being of the other.

But to quote Robert Dabney again. The crowning proof of God's goodness is the redemption of sinners.

[13:08] The crowning proof of God's goodness is the redemption of sinners. The cross is simultaneously the most majestic and most mysterious of all events.

Mysterious in that God punished his own son to whom he is absolutely, purely and infinitely good. Majestic in that the cross, that on the cross God demonstrated his absolute, pure and infinite goodness.

In that all he did there, he did for the well-being of sinners. It's easy within the confines of the Holy Trinity to understand how the Father could be good to the Son.

For there is nothing in the Son which is unlovable or selfish or ugly. But it's far harder to understand how God could be so good to us.

For as we are in our sin, we are unlovable and we are selfish and we are ugly. And yet God is so good to us. He works for our well-being, ultimately demonstrated in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

[14:23] In Romans 3.12, quoting Psalm 14, 1-3 and Psalm 53, 1-3, Paul declares, There is no one who does good, not even one.

No one. But God, who is absolutely, purely and infinitely good, sent his one and only Son for the eternal well-being of those who are not good.

You see, just when you begin to think that you've understood the mechanics of the cross, God shows you a new horizon of his infinite goodness.

God is good to us.

Yes, he's good to all of us. He gives the sun and the rain. He gives the fertility and the regularity of the seasons. But more important still, he gave the sun of his infinite delight for the well-being of those entirely other to him.

[15:42] I wonder whether we grasp the magnitude of this. But for murderers and for terrorists and for criminals and for rapists, God gave his beloved son.

He did not come for the good. He came for the evil. He came not for the selfless, but for the selfish. You may well be wondering this evening what makes Christianity so different from every other religion. What is so different about Christianity from Hinduism?

Or from Islam? Or from Mormonism? After all, every other religion in this world talks about God being good.

But we must humbly ask the question, in what sense are there God's good? And how have their gods demonstrated goodness?

[16:58] As Christians, we're driven back again and again and again to the mystery and to the majesty of the cross on which Jesus, the Son of God, died. Christianity is utterly unique in this.

By virtue of who he is, our God exists for the well-being of others. Which means that he is genuinely merciful, genuinely gracious, and that he gives himself for his people and does not demand that they give themselves for him.

Ask followers of another religion, would you die for your God? And they will unquestioningly say, yes, of course I would.

But Christians insist that their God died for them. Does this not make Christianity utterly unique? And Jesus, worth following and loving?

For only in him can we see and experience genuine goodness in that he continues to exist for the well-being of others.

[18:18] Goodness and God. Secondly this evening, goodness and others. Goodness and others. It should be apparent, should it not, that if Christians follow a God who is absolutely, purity, and infinitely good, in that everything he does is for the well-being of others, then we too must express our discipleship in the same way.

That the Holy Spirit within us wants to express ourselves, wants to express himself in our goodness. We read in Ephesians 2 that we've been saved for good works, which God has prepared beforehand for us to do.

Those good works being for the well-being of others. There's the purpose of our salvation. That we be like God in this.

We work for the well-being of others. That we be entirely other-focused. But we want to ask the question, well, what ultimately is in the best interests of others?

Is the ultimate well-being of the other not found in experiencing for himself or herself the infinite, absolute, and pure goodness of God in the cross of Christ?

[19 : 46] If that is the ultimate demonstration of the goodness of God, it's in his salvation in Christ, then the ultimate well-being of humanity consists in our experience of that salvation.

In our experience of the absolute, pure, and infinite goodness of God to us in the cross of Christ. And so our chief aim as disciples of Jesus is to express the goodness of God and the cross of Christ to others.

To glorify God by extending to them the work of God for their well-being. Again, it should be obvious, should it not, that the Christian can only be good if he or she is living in community with other people.

It is impossible for a Christian to be good unless she is working for the well-being of others. Many mistaken Christians don't attend church because in their view, and I've heard it before, there is no church which is good enough for me.

Don't they know that unless they are living in vital fellowship with other Christians and that unless they are actively working for the well-being of those who are not like them, there is no sense in which they are doing good works.

[21 : 15] In other words, however much it hurts you, you must be a living part of the fellowship of God's people, actively, constantly, intentionally seeking out those for whose well-being you can work.

and that also means that as Glasgow City Free Church, we exist entirely for the well-being of the other, the well-being of God, the well-being of each other's individuals, the well-being of our fellowship, the well-being of our city, the well-being of our world.

We want to express the goodness of God we have experienced in the cross of Christ by introducing our city and our world to the infinite, pure, and absolute goodness of God expressed in the cross of our Savior by proclaiming the gospel of God and by practicing our good works among men.

Now, of course, we could apply this teaching in a thousand different ways and give direction to our lives as Christians and the Christian church, but let me focus on just a few.

First of all, if goodness consists in working for the well-being of others, then let's stop being fixated on what we as individual Christians do or do not like.

[22 : 46] Stop being fixated on what we as individual Christians do or do not like. We exist for the well-being of others. Our church exists for the well-being of others.

We are not a private members club which exists to satisfy its own customers and everyone else can go to hell in a handcart if you pardon my reverence.

The loudest voices in a church I have noticed are often those who want what is best for them. Such a shame that the loudest voices in a church can't be those who want what is best for others.

I'm thinking here very much of things which others might consider indifferent. Worship style, dress code, building layouts, etc.

etc. In all our thinking can we resolve to do this to leave our likes and dislikes at the door and ask ourselves what is in the best interest of the other.

[23 : 58] Secondly, if goodness consists in working for the well-being of others then let's ensure that the way we speak to one another builds one another up and doesn't tear one another down.

The way we speak to each other builds one another up and doesn't tear one another down.

Goodness is working for the well-being of others not just in the things we do but in the things we say.

Good speech builds the other up. Good speech within the community of believers is the expression of the goodness of God. Vinegary, prickly Christians are not good in the Pauline sense of the word and that rather than working for the well-being of others they're too busy tearing others down.

So goodness consists in actively and intentionally using our words to build one another up not discouraging and lifting other people up not putting them down.

Third, if goodness consists in working for the well-being of others then let's ensure that we use all the resources at our disposal for the well-being of others.

[25 : 23] Let's ensure we use all the resources at our disposal for the well-being of others. We live in a selfish age but if God has been good to us in that everything we have comes from him then we

must use all our resources for the well-being of others.

There is no room for selfishness in the kingdom of God. for living in the best houses driving the best cars having the best holidays while the church of Christ lies in ruins and Christians we know yes even in this fellowship cannot afford to put bread on the table for their children.

Fourthly, if goodness consists in working for the well-being of others then let's carefully think how that works in the area of worship. Let's carefully think how goodness works in the area of worship. People use this expression today, ah the praise was good in church, it was good. What they mean was by that is that it was high quality or more basically, well I enjoyed it, I enjoyed it, it was good. the problem consists in that goodness consists not in what I want, in what I enjoy or what I think, it is what is for the well-being of others.

[26 : 57] I was expressly told in scripture that worship and praise exists for the well-being of God and God alone. for his benefit, not our benefit.

He commands that we worship him in spirit and truth, that we approach him in the name of Christ with clean hands and a pure heart in the beauty of holiness. That is good praise.

Fifthly, we're getting near the end, if goodness consists in the well-being of others and their highest well-being consists in experiencing the absolute, pure, and infinite goodness of God demonstrated in the cross of Christ, then evangelism and mission must be at the very heart of all we are and all we do as Glasgow City Free Church.

We do not exist for ourselves, but for the proclamation of the gospel, so that all men and women everywhere may hear the good news of the goodness of God and how that goodness is extended and offered to them in the cross of Christ.

That's why as a church and as individuals, we want to heavily invest in mission to others prayerfully, personally, and financially recognizing that the world's highest good consists in the experience of the goodness of God on the cross of Christ.

[28 : 43] Secondly, if goodness consists in the well-being of others, we must be good to ourselves. We must be good to ourselves.

others. When you get on an airplane and receive the safety briefing from the cabin crew, they always tell you to put your own oxygen mask on before you help others with theirs.

The reasoning is sound of what use are you to others if you are already dead from asphyxia. It is not selfish to be good to ourselves so that we may be good to others.

To rest well. To relax well. To care for your own body, mind and spirit. After all, we cannot work for the well-being of others if we ourselves are not experiencing the rest that is to be found in Jesus. And how can we possibly point others to the well-being to be found in the cross of Christ if we ourselves are not finding our well-being there?

[29 : 55] well-being. And then lastly, if goodness consists in the well-being of others, then let's be slow to speak, quick to listen, and slow to become angry with each other.

Slow to speak, quick to listen, slow to become angry with each other. There may be, there are some of us in Glasgow City Free Church who are in pain tonight, some of us who are lonely, hurting, grieving, anxious, fearful, depressed.

what those of us in that situation need most aren't people to talk to us and tell us things that we already know. What we need most are people to care for us, to put an arm around our shoulders and to listen with intelligence and compassion to us, to say very little indeed, very sparingly perhaps to remind us of the goodness of God to us in the cross of Christ, but most important of all, people to listen to us, to be there for the other when the other should need us most.

For me, the study of the goodness of God has been at the same time the most frustrating but also fulfilling study I've ever done. I'm scratching the surface of the hundred thousand ways we could apply this teaching into the life of the church.

But let me go back to the very beginning. Goodness is working for the well-being of the other and God is the sum of all perfections.

[31 : 59] This is what he is, this is who your God is. And a spirit who lives within you through faith in Christ wants to work for your well-being.

and wants you to work for the well-being of others. So let's pray for the selflessness of Christ and the goodness of Christ to be seen in us.

Remembering the words of our Lord, let your light shine before men so that when they see your good deeds they may give thanks to your Father who is in heaven.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[33 : 07] Hen. Amen. Amen.