

The Fruit of Goodness

Galatians 5:22

I face the same danger in preaching this morning that I did two weeks ago when we studied the fruit of kindness. It is the danger of moralism, an exhortation to good moral living but given in the absence of the gospel. It is to preach morality without reference to Christ, and without reference to Christian faith. It is the call to live a good Christian life, but without the call to faith in Jesus. It is the exhortation to do good with no foundation in the salvation or the redemption which God has given to us in Jesus. Be good, for goodness' sake. Try harder. Follow the golden rule. Keep the ten commandments. Make the world a better place. But when those words come without the invitation of the gospel, to believe in Jesus, there is no hope, for your own attempted good works earn nothing for you in the sight of God. In short, your goodness is never good enough. Not for God.

Therefore, if you are asked the question, "Why should God let you into heaven when you die," don't answer by saying, "I have tried to live a good life." Because whatever you have done, however good you have managed to be, it isn't good enough to earn or merit God's favor.

So my sermon this afternoon is not simply, "Be good." And yet, the Scripture does call us to goodness. "Hold fast to what is good," we are exhorted in two places in the Bible. And we should pray for goodness, according to 2 Thessalonians 1:11, "To this end we always pray for you, that our God may... fulfill every resolve for good."

The fruit of the Spirit is goodness. So let me start with something that may be obvious to you, but is not obvious any longer in the world in which we live. The point is simple.

I. LIFE IS DEFINED BY MORAL CATEGORIES.

And goodness is a moral category. Moral has reference to right and wrong. Thus some things are right, other things are wrong. Some things are identified and understood to be good. Others are evil. That is the contrast, good and evil.

But how do we know the definition of good and evil? How can you identify what is good and what is bad? Many people simply answer those questions without any absolute reference point outside themselves. Good and evil are relative. Morality is relative. Its subjective. We each decide for ourselves.

Sadly, the essence of rebellion against God is to claim your own personal autonomy to declare that standard of morality for yourself. I decide what is right for me, you decide what is right for you. And you have no right to impose your morality on me. That's the essence of the world when it teaches morality. Which is to say, there is no absolute standard of morality. There is no objective judgment of what is right and wrong. God doesn't exist, or if he does, what he declares carries no authority in itself. That's what the world says, and now, with respect to the morality of marriage as God himself determined when he created the world. God says,

Gen. 2:24 "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed."

That's marriage. That is the morality of marriage. But, of course, we live in a nation that no longer upholds that definition. I raise that issue this morning not to incite your political sensitivities, but to demonstrate what ought to be obvious to everyone.

I. LIFE IS DEFINED BY MORAL CATEGORIES.

And you can't escape it. There is a category of right and a category of wrong. In human life, there is a category of good and a category of evil. There is a reason for that, for we are creatures made in God's image. And God in his very essence is a God who defines morality. God is defined as good, infinitely good, and he stands opposed to evil. Living in that context of morality is the essence of what it means to be created in the image of God.

So the fruit of the Spirit is goodness. The work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of God's people is the work of producing goodness. And that work of the Holy Spirit is necessary because, since the fall, man is evil. Do you remember what happened when Adam and Eve fell into sin, when they rebelled against God? Do you remember what happened to them when they claimed their own right to determine good and evil? God had forbidden to eat from just one tree in the Garden of Eden, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And he threatened them with death if they disobeyed.

Gen. 3:4 But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. 5 For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

In that sense, the Serpent was right. They would know good and evil. Previously, created by God as good, they did not know evil. They were without sin. But we read on,

Gen. 3:6 "So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. 7 Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths."

Now they know evil. For they are evil. And we all are descended from them, inheriting from them that same knowledge not only of good, but also of evil. And our basic confession of sin before God must be the same as David when he prays,

Ps. 51:3 "For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. 4 Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment. 5 Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me."

Beloved, life is defined by moral categories, and,

A. The existence of evil is undeniable.

In order to see what difference that makes for our lives, let me look at Romans 12. Look at this application to us, and though I will come back to this verse later in the sermon, look at the obvious general categories for your life. Good and evil.

Rom. 12:9 "Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good."

As creatures, created in the image of God, you and I are called to abhor what is evil. That requires a judgment, doesn't it? You have to recognize the undeniable existence of evil, you have to identify what is evil, before you come to hate it. And to put that positively,

B. We must pursue the virtue of goodness.

So there is a moral category category of goodness, and that must be the focus of your Christian life. It is the focus of Paul's prayer in,

2 Thes. 1:11 "To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power."

One of the greatest threats to our world today is the loss the concept of virtue, the moral category of goodness. As I illustrated at the outset, we now call what is evil, good; and what is good, evil. And yet, I believe there is an even greater, more subtle threat from the mindset of the world that has infected the evangelical church of our day, and it is the loss of the whole category of virtue. And we replace the broad, objective category of virtue with a cheap substitute, namely values.

And here is the difference. Virtue has reference to character. And it has reference to the ultimate authority of God, who objectively defines what is good. So virtue has reference to God's evaluation of your character. Values has reference only to what is important to you, and it tends to leave God out of the picture entirely.

Author David Wells is no doubt my favorite living author. He writes this as he critiques the modern church, "[Virtues] are the moral norms that are enduringly right for all people, in all places, and in all times....Scripture...clearly speaks of moral excellence and goodness in connection with the character of God....We can therefore say with confidence that there are moral excellencies that are always right because they make up who God is in his character...Values represent the moral talk of a relativistic world and one that is clearly quite novel in some ways....Once we left behind a moral world, we had no option but to treat values in a value-free way because what is right for one is not necessarily right for another. As the old moral world has faded, then, its virtues have faded with it. In the twilight of its dissolution, we are left with values."

So, as Christians, we must pursue the virtue of goodness. And for fallen men, born in sin and evil by nature, that is possible only by the regenerating and sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.

So let's begin then a more specific study of the virtue of goodness as the fruit of the spirit. And that beginning must be,

II. THE GOODNESS OF GOD.

Indeed, it is that goodness of God that forms the basis of our worship, our praise. For example,

Psalm 107:8 "Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wondrous works to the children of man."

I make frequent mention of the Hebrew word translated sometimes as "steadfast love," sometimes "lovingkindness." It is perhaps the word with the fullest meaning and content with reference to God. It is his covenant faithfulness. It is sometimes translated simply goodness, and that is not a bad translation at all. Psalm 107:8 from the NKJV reads, "Oh, that men would give thanks to the LORD for His goodness, And for His wonderful works to the children of men!"

So a study of the fruit of goodness begins with this acknowledgement that God is good. In fact,

A. God alone is good in his essence.

Luke 18:18 "And a ruler asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" 19 And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone."

Interesting, isn't it, that Jesus in his humanity, rejects the title of "good." He wasn't being addressed as God in the faith of that rich young ruler, so he rejected the title of good. "No one is good except God alone."

I could, of course, emphasize the negative side of that in terms of our own fallen nature as human beings. For example, Rom. 3:10 "None is righteous, no, not one; 11 no one

understands; no one seeks for God. 12 All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.”

So goodness cannot be reduced to subjective values of human origin, for there is nothing good in us. “No one is good except God alone.” But I can’t stop there, because the Bible doesn’t stop there. It is not enough to say that God is good. That must be the starting point, but with that starting point, we move on to this necessary reality.

B. God works goodness in his people.

It is called sanctification. Not justification. God doesn’t justify us on the basis of our goodness. We are justified by grace through faith. Grace alone. Faith alone. But those whom he justifies, he sanctifies. And among other descriptions and definitions, God makes us good! God works goodness in us. Goodness is the fruit of his holy spirit.

Eph. 5:8 “...for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light 9 (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true).”

Similarly, 3 John 11 “Beloved, do not imitate evil but imitate good. Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God.”

Again, those moral categories. Good and evil. And the work of God in us so that as Christians, you do good. You demonstrate the virtue of goodness. You imitate God in his goodness.

None of us does that perfectly, of course, but John’s point is that if there is no goodness, if there is no imitation of God’s goodness in your life, if your life is only, therefore, evil, then “you have not seen God.” You are not a Christian.

So Jesus did not only die in order to forgive you your sin, he died to make you good. We sing those words in the familiar hymn, rightly expressing what the Scripture teaches: “There is a green hill far away, without a city wall, where the dear Lord was crucified, who died to save us all...He died that we might be forgiven, he died to make us good, that we might go at last to heav’n, saved by his precious blood...O dearly, dearly has he loved, and we must love him too, and trust in his redeeming blood, and try his works to do.”

Those whom he justifies, he sanctifies. Those whose sins he forgives, he transforms. As Christians, God calls us to goodness. To moral goodness, as defined by his own moral law. And so I exhort you unto that same goodness. It is not the exhortation, “Be good for goodness’ sake,” but rather, “Be good because the God who saved you is good.” “Be good, for in that way you love and serve the God of your redemption.”

As an encouragement to who are Christians, we read, Rom. 15:14 “I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another.”

Paul is encouraging the Christians at Rome in with the observation that they are “full of goodness.” He didn’t forget what Jesus had said, “There is no one good but God.” He is not contradicting that. But rather he is emphasizing that the God who is perfectly good in his own eternal essence as God communicates that goodness to those whom he saves. God works goodness in his people. God enables us to live in this goodness, to do good.

Indeed, that is God’s calling for our lives.

1 Peter 3:10 “Whoever desires to love life and see good days,

let him keep his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking deceit; 11 let him turn away from evil and do good; let him seek peace and pursue it. 12 For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer. But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.”

Go back with me now, please to,
Rom. 12:9 “Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil.
Cling to what is good.”

Beloved, the Christian life is,

A. A call to hate what is evil.

Our sinful natures are attracted to what is evil. That’s the struggle of the Christian life. But it is a battle you must fight. It is the exhortation of the gospel. Hate what is evil.

So how do you know what to hate? What is the definition of evil? Lawlessness. That which breaks the law of God. Sin. Evil and sin ought to be used as synonyms. Sadly, we usually use less morally based words as synonyms for sin. Like mistakes. Errors. A lapse in judgment. We downplay the moral quality of sin. We excuse it. Beloved, sin is evil. And when you sin, you do evil.

When you rebel against the authority which God has established for you, you do evil. When you harm someone else, even with your words or your desires, you do evil. When you are impure in your thoughts or your actions or your words, you do evil. When you steal, when you fail to work hard, when you are lazy or distracted to the degree that you fail to accomplish all you are able to do, you do evil. When you lie, slander, or gossip you do evil. When your words harm someone else’s good reputation, you do evil. And when you covet, when you are jealous, when you desire that which belongs to someone else, you do evil. I

hope you recognize in that list the second table of the law, the last six of the ten commandments.

And the first four have the same force. When you formulate other gods, or make a higher priority of anything in this world other than God, you do evil. When you formulate a visual image of god or worship God by visual sight rather than by faith, you do evil. When you take the Lord’s name in vain or in any way disrespect the great glory of his honor, you do evil. When you fail to make holy the sabbath day, you do evil.

When you fail to love God with all your heart and strength, you do evil. And when you fail to love one another as the Bible defines that love, you do evil. So when you are unkind, it is evil. When you are impatient or rude, it is evil. When you are irritable or resentful, when you envy or boast, when you are arrogant or insist on your own way, you do what is evil. I hope you recognize the reference to 1 Corinthians 13 in that list.

Beloved, God has defined what is good, and God has defined what is evil. And he says so clearly to all of those who believe in Jesus, “Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil.”

So search our own heart, and don’t be satisfied with excusing your sins as simply part of your own personality. Hate what is evil. Call it evil, and by the grace of God at work within your own heart, put it to death. Consider the sin that remains in your heart as an enemy that must be destroyed.

And then, according to Romans 12:9, “cling to what is good.” Hold fast. The gospel includes,

B. A call to cling to what is good.

And who defines “good”? I hope the answer to that question

is obvious by now. God does. So cling to those things which God says are good. Paul writes the same thing to the Thessalonians.

1 Thes. 5:21 "...but test everything; hold fast what is good. 22 Abstain from every form of evil."

And then, having given that exhortation, Paul returns to the source of the strength by which you are enabled to keep this commandment.

1 Thes. 5:23 "Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it."

So there is no moralism here. No legalism. No self-righteousness. No works-salvation. Just the realization that God is at work in the lives of his people. And the promise of encouragement is so plain, given in the form of that benediction. People of God, "the God of peace himself [will] sanctify you completely."

Those whom God justifies he also sanctifies. Those whom he saves, he makes holy.

And so if you are not a Christian, if you have not trusted in Jesus Christ for the salvation of your soul and for the forgiveness of your sins, then I call you to do so now. Right now. Today. Confess your sins to God that he might forgive you yours sins and cleanse you from all your unrighteousness. There is no other hope. And no other way. Believe in Jesus. Receive him, trust him to give to you what you could never earn for yourself by your own good works.

Acts 4:12 "And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

And to you who have that salvation,

Rom. 12:9 "Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good."

In other words, "walk in the Spirit."

Gal. 5:22 "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law."