

## **July 27th: The Fruit of Goodness**

Welcome, my friends, to our summer sermon series on the Fruits of the Spirit–this is a way for us to explore some big questions about what it means to be disciples of Jesus in our modern world. We’ve been looking at one fruit per Sunday, all with the goal of offering some practical ways for you to grow in your faith and respond to our broken world. Today we’re studying the fruit of goodness–and I hope that our time together gives you some new insights about ways you can see goodness and cultivate it in our communities. So we’re glad you’ve joined us for these conversations, and we look forward to diving in deeper with you over the next couple of months.

Before we begin this meditation, let’s take a moment to pray together.

*God of Goodness, in your wisdom, you created each of us with goodness in mind. It was always your intention that creation would be good, so we look to you now for insight about how to cultivate goodness inside of us and around us in our larger community. Remind us that goodness is not synonymous with perfection, and that we can aim to do good without any fear of failure or fear of mistakes. Be with us now, in these thoughts that I have prepared, and in the meditations of all of our hearts. Amen.*

One summer during college, I was working at a Christian family camp associated with my home denomination, and one of my now colleagues was scheduled to be the preacher of the week at the youth camp next door. It was senior high week, meaning that hundreds of high schoolers from around New England descended upon the camp, and if you know anything about teenagers, you know it gets a little crazy and chaotic. Each night, we would hear the loud shouts and laughter echoing across the lake, we could listen to the rowdy singing around the campfire, and I wondered what they were learning that seemed to cause so much joy and excitement. So one evening, when a couple of my coworkers at the family camp and I were scheduled for a shift down the road to watch certain cabins during the counselor’s break time, I asked a few of the campers what the topic of the week was.

And they all said, “goodness.” I thought I heard them wrong, because what teenager gets that amped talking about a theme of “goodness?”

But when I asked again, they clarified, saying that they were specifically learning about what it means to be created “good,” or created for goodness. Each session, they were diving deeper into the creation narratives in the Book of Genesis to hear more about what it means to be part of God’s desire for wholeness, studying the way our world and humanity were designed for a divine purpose. They recalled that my colleague had taught them a word that shows up over and over again in that original story: the Hebrew word “tov,” which we translate into English as “good.” They had learned that at every stage of the creation process, God looks out over what was created, and proclaims that it was exactly as he intended. In each section, we hear, “And God saw that it was good.”

And when our biblical author begins to describe the creation of humans, we hear this, from verses 26-31:

“Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them... God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.”

These teens had discovered that goodness is good news. And to many of them, goodness was revolutionary.

It was revolutionary because so much of our religious teaching emphasizes what is wrong about humanity: theologians talk about sin and the need for salvation, pastors preach about injustice and evil in our world, and individual Christians lament the deep brokenness that we experience as we navigate our daily lives. And sometimes, this is for a good reason. We see the effects of selfishness, greed, idolatry, and corruption all around us—we don’t have to look

very far to find a person, institution, or system that is impacted by our human frailty.

But I think the reason that my colleague's teachings at camp resonated with so many of those high schoolers is that this negative way of speaking about ourselves and understanding our calling as disciples is inherently demotivating and discouraging. When we think about our spiritual lives, and the journey that we are on towards personal transformation and communal justice, it can feel impossible to achieve those things when our culture and relationship feel so stuck in sin and evil. And on a deeper level, we might even disconnect from this type of faith entirely, because this kind of language constantly reminds us that we don't measure up.

But as these teens discovered deep in the woods of New Hampshire, goodness is good news!

Many of these highschoolers had never been told they were good before. They had never encountered the kind of teaching and the kind of faith that told them that they were designed for goodness. Most of them believed that they were stupid, or silly, or worthless, or had internalized messages that they were troublesome or unlovable. Some had grown up in homes that were saturated in guilt and shame rather than support and encouragement. Some had already gone through situations where they had experienced deep rejection or heartache. And a few had sought out unhealthy coping mechanisms like drugs, self-harm, or thoughts of suicide to numb the pain that they felt inside.

And so when someone told them that they were good, they loved it. They loved that kind of faith, they loved that kind of spirituality. To receive the news that God had looked at them and deemed them "very good" was a way to rewrite their stories, to hear that divine voice with those words of truth and love was a fresh start that many of them had not even known was possible. I ran into a few of those campers years down the line, when they enrolled in college while I attended seminary, and they proudly showed me their tattoos: Hebrew

letters inked on their skin, a reminder that they were, and are, and always will be “tov.”

That’s how much goodness transformed their lives.

And I think the same can be true for all of us—young and old, women, men, and nonbinary, rich or poor, lost or found. I think goodness is a message that we need to hear because there are still so many voices, both internal and external, that might try to convince us that everything, including ourselves, is hopelessly broken.

But before we talk more about that, let’s go back to our reading for this summer, the one we’ve been trying to memorize together and ink onto our hearts. In the context of this passage from the letter to the Galatians, how is Paul defining goodness? What does he mean when he says that goodness is a Fruit of the Spirit? Well, the word that is used in this passage comes from the Greek root “agathos,” which is often seen as the New Testament companion to the Old Testament idea of “tov.” And like “tov,” is woven into the fabric of our ancient stories, “agathos,” is sprinkled throughout our newer scripture texts, reminding us that goodness was a central theme of Jesus’ ministry and later, Paul’s writings to these early churches.

In each of these different pieces of wisdom, goodness is still good news.

For example, in Ephesians 2:10, the New Living Translation reads, “For we are God’s masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good (agathos) things he planned for us long ago.”

Has anyone ever told you that you’re a masterpiece before? Have you been told that you are a priceless treasure? If you haven’t, then I’m so glad to be able to share this good news with you, even if it takes you a little while to believe it. I know it sometimes takes a little bit of unlearning and separating ourselves from the negative messages in our heads and in our culture, but if you’re looking to take a next step in your faith this week and you don’t quite believe

this yet, I would encourage you to re-read that verse a few times and meditate on it, and really listen for God's voice to confirm those thoughts for you. Really take it in, let it be written on your heart, repeat it to yourself when you need to hear it again. Again, that's Ephesians 2:10, specifically the New Living Translation.

But when you've really internalized the good news of goodness, you're ready for the next step.

I really like this particular passage because it seems to build on the thoughts that Paul expresses in Galatians. Our biblical author is basically saying that because awareness of our own inherent goodness has been cultivated inside of ourselves, and because we understand our own deep loveliness in God's eyes, we are now equipped to do the good things that God has designed us for.

Here's the soundbite version: Because we have been made good, we have been made to do good. Because we have been made whole, we have been made to make our world whole.

When we are secure in our own value and worth, our inner goodness overflows out of us and into our relationships, our communities, and our larger culture—bringing that good news to people who also need to hear it. It doesn't have to be big, or on a national scale, or newsworthy, but like goodness itself, acts of goodness are also transformative. When we do good in the world, it might not seem significant on its own, but God sees the bigger picture. Archbishop Desmond Tutu says it this way, "Do your little bit of good where you are; it's those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world."

But the even better news is that we don't do this work of goodness alone. Because goodness is the result of the Spirit's presence in our lives, God is actually laboring alongside us to bring more goodness into the world. As part of his letter to the church of Philippi, the Apostle Paul writes, "For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good (agathos) work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus."

When God made us good, and made us to do good, God promised that those good works wouldn't die with us, or be forgotten: they will be brought to fruition and completed. Maybe not on our schedule, or within our lifetimes, but God doesn't leave anything unfinished. God doesn't leave anything unresolved. God doesn't let goodness go to waste. We may not always see the beauty that our seeds of goodness have cultivated, but the garden will be beautiful all the same.

And while that's reassuring on its own, there's also some more good news in this verse. Paul says that God is the one who perfects things, not us. That means that we don't have to worry about being perfect ourselves, because God will take care of that for us. And that is a relief to me, and I hope a relief to other perfectionists in our community who might be struggling with feeling like you don't measure up, or you might not be good enough to be a disciple of Jesus. A life of faith, including a life of goodness, doesn't require that we never mess up or we never make a mistake. It's inevitable that sometimes good people make the wrong choice. But God says that this doesn't prevent us from being good servants, or good leaders, or good teachers.

We can be deeply good without having to be perfect. We can be deeply loved without having to be without flaws. Being good and being perfect are not the same thing, and God would rather you live into being good than attempt to be perfect.

My friends, I hope goodness will be good news for you today, just like it was for those campers all those summers ago. I hope the truth of goodness will be revolutionary for you, reminding you that you were created on purpose, for a purpose. As you enter a new week, I hope you will remember that being made good is an invitation to do good in our world, and that you are welcomed into that practice wherever you are on your journey of faith.

You might not be able to do all the good the world needs, but the world needs all the good that you can do. Amen.