

Sermon for Zion, May 05, 2019

Hymns: 471 – We Are One In The Spirit; 420 – Praise, I Will Praise You, Lord;
God Is So Good; 468 – Lord, Dismiss Us With Your Blessing

Scripture: Galatians 5:22-23; 2 Peter 1:1-11

Sermon Title: “Fruit of the Spirit – Goodness” *Rev. Douglas Rollwage*

Isaiah 1:16-18

“Wash yourselves and make yourselves clean. Stop doing the evil things I see you do. Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.”

The Lord says, “Come, let us talk about these things. Though your sins are like scarlet, they can be as white as snow. Though your sins are deep red, they can be white like wool.”

2 Peter 1:1-11

From Simon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ; To those who through the righteousness of our God and Saviour Jesus Christ have been given a faith as precious as ours: May God give you more and more grace and peace as you grow in your knowledge of God and Jesus our Lord.

We have everything we need to live a life that pleases God. It was all given to us by God’s own power, when we learned that he had invited us to share in his wonderful goodness. God made great and marvelous promises, so that his nature would become part of us. Then we could escape our evil desires and the corrupt influences of this world.

For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. If all these are yours and they are growing in you, they’ll keep you from becoming inactive and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

...Set your minds, then, on endorsing by your conduct the fact that God has called and chosen you. Do this and you will never ever be lost. In this way you will receive a rich welcome into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Galatians 5:22-23 New International Version (NIV)

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

What does it mean to be good? To be a good person? A good woman? A good man? We must know what it means; we describe people in that way all the time. Many people I meet even characterise themselves as good: “I don’t need to go to church,” they’ll say, when I invite them. “I’m a good person.” I don’t get into an argument with them by responding, “Really?” But the Bible isn’t as shy as I am.

You might be surprised that of all the references to the word “good” – and the Bible uses that word about 1000 times – it only refers to people as “good” twice. Twice! Not counting Jesus for a moment, only two people in all the Bible are ever described as “good”, and they’re both in the New Testament: Joseph of Arimathea, who lends his tomb for the body of Jesus, and Barnabas, who was one of the first great missionaries, and the fellow who brought the Apostle Paul under his wing and into the life of the church. That’s it; those two guys. I’m sure we would describe all kinds of Biblical personages as “good,” but the Bible quite pointedly doesn’t.

Now, I didn’t count Jesus in the above list, because being both fully human and fully divine, he’s in a different category. But he makes us think about it nonetheless; in his interaction with a fellow we traditionally call “The Rich Young Ruler,” we hear this (*Luke 18:18-19*): *A certain ruler asked Jesus, “Good Teacher, what must I do to have eternal life?” Jesus said, “Why do you call me good? Only God is good.”*

“*Only God is good.*” That’s the Biblical view of goodness – only God is good. Jesus, the embodiment of the very nature of God, is of course the best example of what it is to be “good.” The rest of us? We struggle. We may try to be good, but our compass is out of whack. We tend to point in another direction altogether. The Apostle Paul, who knew the Scriptures intimately, summed it up like this (*Romans 3:10*): *As the Scriptures say: “There is no one who always does what is right, not even one.”* And Paul includes himself in this (*Romans 7:18*): *“For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.”* Paul’s compass is broken too.

Paul is determined to make the point – and in his letter to the church in Rome, he does so over four very densely packed chapters – that none of us is truly good, not even Paul. None of us comes up to God’s standards of holiness, righteousness, justice and truth. We have all fallen short. There is something broken, deep down inside. We all need help. None of us are truly good.

We Presbyterians have a particularly robust sense of this theological pessimism. Our founder, John Calvin, described the human condition as one of “total depravity,” by which he meant that the brokenness within us – all of us - distorts even our best actions. Even our most noble of gestures have at their core some aspect of self-interest; we want thanks, or praise, or credit, or pay-back, or at the very least, the thrill of self-righteous satisfaction that we’ve done something good.

“But that’s not me,” you say. “That might be how other people are, but that’s not me. I’m better than that. I’m better than other people.” Which is perhaps why Calvin begins his writing on Total Depravity with the section entitled, “Man By Nature Is Inclined To Deluded Self-Admiration.” Thanks, Calvin. Thanks for that.

So, with the notable exception of Joseph of Arimathea and Barnabas, none of us are truly good. As Jesus says, “Only God is good.” But our reading from earlier lists “goodness” as one of the Fruits of the Spirit. What’s going on here?

Well, another of our readings is from the letter called 2 Peter. Written as instruction and encouragement to fellow believers, it says this:

We have everything we need to live a life that pleases God. It was all given to us by God’s own power, when we learned that he had invited us to share in his wonderful goodness. God made great and marvelous promises, so that his nature would become part of us. Then we could escape our evil desires and the corrupt influences of this world.

Only God is good – that’s true – but God has “*invited us to share in his wonderful goodness.*” Only God is good, but God is sharing that goodness with us. When we turn to Christ as Saviour and Lord, God gives us the gift of new life; the Holy Spirit dwells within us, beginning the work of regeneration – setting that internal compass in a new direction, one that points away from us, and towards God. Our inherently sinful nature is, day by day, replaced by the “nature of God”; the distortion is fading, and the image of God is becoming more clear. Those desires which had led us astray are losing their grip; rather than the values of the world, we are increasingly, through worship, prayer, study, and the example of others, guided by the direction of God in our lives.

One of the great Synods of the Church was held in North Africa, just over 1600 years ago. They talked about this very thing, and concluded the following: “*For*

every single good action we need the help of the grace of God through Jesus Christ; and this is not only to perceive what is right, but also to practice it, so that without it we can neither possess, think, speak, or do anything really good and holy.”

Now, assisted by God, we are able to truly do good, in thanksgiving to God, and in response to the grace of God active in and through us. Not to earn our way to God; but to thank God for what God has done for us and for the world in Jesus Christ. Our good works are not done as a precondition to receiving God’s grace, mercy and love; they are an outgrowth of, and our response to, God’s grace, mercy and love.

These outward signs of the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives is called the Fruit of the Spirit. We’ve spent some time on this earlier this year, and we’re back to it, now that Lent and Easter are past. We’ve focussed on love, joy, peace, patience kindness, and today, Goodness. And how does Goodness come about? By doing good. Again, the Bible doesn’t talk about people being good. But over and again, it talks about us *doing* good. Good isn’t something you *are*. It is something you *do*.

When God is calling the people of Israel back to the right path, he does so through these words of Isaiah (*Isaiah 1:16-18*):

“Wash yourselves and make yourselves clean. Stop doing the evil things I see you do. Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.”

“Cease to do evil, learn to do good.” Learn to do good. It takes practice, like anything worth doing. It takes time to grow, like any fruit.

When it comes to “doing good,” I could roll out verse after verse, well into the evening. But that wouldn’t be good. I’ll just share a sample:

- *Hebrews 13:16 - Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.*
- *1 Thessalonians 5:15 - See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all.*
- *3 John 1:11 - Beloved, do not imitate what is evil but imitate what is good. Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God.*

It is “doing good” which is to be our primary characteristic as Christians. It defines us as the People of God. Jesus preached a sermon of his own on this, which we can read in Luke Chapter 6. He concludes (Luke 6:44-45): *“It is impossible for a good tree to produce bad fruit—as impossible as it is for a bad tree to produce good fruit. Do not men know what a tree is by its fruit? You cannot pick figs from briars, or gather a bunch of grapes from a blackberry bush! A good person produces good things from the good stored up in their heart.”* And that inner goodness comes from God, is our response to God, and is the sign to the world that we are the people of God.

Our passage from 2 Peter sees goodness as our response to faith, and as the foundation for the other elements of the mature Christian life. Listen to how Peter builds this list:

For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. If all these are yours and they are growing in you, they’ll keep you from becoming inactive and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

“...they’ll keep you from becoming inactive and unfruitful.” That’s the worst thing the writer of 2 Peter can imagine; a Christian, blessed by God with the gift of Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit, doing nothing. Inactive. Unfruitful. No, as the Children of God, as the Brothers and Sisters of Jesus, we must *“make every effort”* to *“Cease to do evil, learn to do good;” “imitate what is good.” “Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have;” “always seek to do good to one another and to all.”* These things are not only signs to the world of who we are and whom we serve, they are the foundation of our growth in Christ.

The 2 Peter passage concludes, *“Set your minds, then, on endorsing by your conduct the fact that God has called and chosen you. Do this and you will never ever be lost. In this way you will receive a rich welcome into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.”*

Such a powerful phrase: *“Set your minds, then, on endorsing by your conduct the fact that God has called and chosen you.”* Another translation is, *“My brothers and sisters, God called you and chose you to be his. Do your best to live in a way that*

shows you really are God's called and chosen people. If you do all this, you will never fall."

*"We have everything we need to live a life that pleases God." And so, with this in mind, I put before you a challenge: Determine every day to respond to God and to grow your faith through doing good. Begin your day with a prayer, that God would provide the opportunity. Keep your eyes, your ears, your heart open to what you might do - to what you will do! Learn to do good; make every effort; *"Do your best to live in a way that shows you really are God's called and chosen people... In this way you will receive a rich welcome into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ."**

Only God is good. But God has called us to do good. It is our purpose, our response to God, our witness to the world, and the foundation of our Christian walk. May we all respond to the challenge. Thanks be to God. Amen.