

“Empowered - God’s Goodness”

June 27, 2021

Summer series – Fruit of the Spirit

God is good, all the time... All the time, God is good. That’s a powerful theological statement, and we need to understand it as we move through the fruit of the Spirit.

The word in Galatians for goodness is agathosune. **SHOW SLIDE:** Greek word for GOODNESS (AGATHOSUNE) ἀγαθωσύνη

Some have also described it as being generous - but going above and beyond what's expected, being open-hearted and selfless. The Greek word is specific to Scripture and doesn't appear in secular Greek writing.

How is goodness different from kindness? Remember that kindness is a quality that makes others feel comfortable and at ease with you. It’s not simply about doing something, but even more how you are. Goodness, though, is different. It’s more than simply being just or fair. It is more than not doing what is evil and not doing what is bad. Goodness is active and ready.

Scholar William Barclay defines goodness as "virtue equipped at every point." So there's something about being ready to show goodness, to do what is right, to show love and kindness. But goodness also means to offer correction if needed as we do good for others and do good work for God. If you’ve ever had to speak a hard word or if you’ve ever received a hard word from someone, it may not have seemed like goodness at the time, but that’s a part of it when we’re coming at it from a spiritual perspective.

It’s important to say clearly that God is the measure of goodness. It's not surprising that all of the fruit of the Spirit are grounded in God - who God is and what God is like. Bearing fruit is only possible for us by God's grace as we set our hearts toward God. We cannot achieve love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control on our own. They are the fruit of the Holy Spirit working in us.

And goodness comes from God. Goodness shows in our desire for deepening our own spiritual growth and taking the moral high ground. We can only show goodness because God is good, and we respond to God's goodness with our words, our actions, and our lives. We overcome evil with good. We show goodness actively - by being engaged in the world.

This parable from Matthew is an effective companion text for goodness because the word for "goodness" only appears four times in the New Testament - mostly like it does in Galatians - as a characteristic. **SHOW SLIDE:** II Thessalonians 1: 11

To this end we always pray for you, asking that our God will make you worthy of his call

and will fulfill by his power every good resolve and work of faith.

So that word for goodness doesn't appear a lot, but the word for "good" - **agathos** - appears many times in the Gospels, including at the end of this parable in Matthew. Where we read the word "generous," we could read "good." *Are you jealous because I am generous? Are you jealous because I am good?* And if you found yourself saying "yes" I am jealous, then count yourself among many who struggle here.

Different angles grab us here. Maybe we sympathize with the all-day workers who say they've been treated unfairly. Where's the justice in latecomers getting the same pay? How is that fair? What's this about the same pay for unequal work? What kind of business practice is that?

But it's important to realize that in Jesus' time, day laborers gathered each morning hoping to be hired. They worked day-to-day with nothing steady or certain - just enough to survive. The desperation and hardship of day-to-day work was a reality. Steady employment is still elusive for some, and day labor is a reality around us. Perhaps we can see the goodness of the landowner responding to these difficult circumstances.

But I've been struck by another angle. What if we look at the landowner more carefully? He hires workers for the day, but then keeps going out to get more workers. You'd think he'd send a manager which was the usual way, but he goes himself. Why didn't he get enough the first time around?

And why does he pay those latecomers the same as the all-day workers? It just isn't fair! That's the real downer of the story - that's the struggle. For the religious leaders of Matthew's day and even now, the landowner's sense of justice seems skewed. And if we're honest, we don't like it much either. We want things to be fair - especially fair for us.

But Jesus' words aren't focused on wages earned, but on the landowner and what he's like. The parable instructs us about God's grace - that unconditional love that we cannot earn - that we don't deserve - but that we receive because of how God is - because of God's generosity and God's goodness.

We affirm God's grace in theory. We like to talk about it, but when it comes to extending it to others, it's tough. Grace is great, but not always when it applies to someone else and not just me - and especially to people I don't like, don't get along with, don't agree with, and you can see how the list goes on! Scholar N.T. Wright reminds us, though, "we're all equal at the foot of the cross."

What the day-long workers object to isn't that the latecomers receive wages, but that they receive equal wages. The all-day workers think they should receive a bonus because they worked more. They resent the landowner's generosity. It goes beyond

their expectations.

We get that, but if the parable points us to consider God's goodness and generosity and Jesus' teaching about the nature of God's love and care for us, then we might feel differently. God will not stop looking for more workers. Each one is valued, and that is God's goodness showing through.

The struggle can happen in any group - at work, at church, in any organization. We start to question people's motives. *How is that person in leadership? He's new. She's not been here long. What gives them the right to be doing that?* In the parable, the landowner wants to maximize the harvest, so he gets more workers. It's not when they came to work; it's that they were needed and willing to work for the harvest.

We talk about God's steadfast love - love that doesn't quit or end. We say God is good (all the time). God pursues us faithfully and offers us grace in Jesus Christ. But God's values aren't our human values. Grace, by its very nature, isn't fair. It has nothing to do with fairness. God's invitation into relationship isn't based on our merits, but on God's mercy. Thanks be to God for that! And that's something we don't control.

It's a powerful and difficult lesson because it's easy to get self-righteous about our faith. It's easy to get bogged down in what I've done for God that I forget what God does for me. Simply put, it's easy to forget about God's goodness and focus more on our own perceived goodness. We're more likely to focus on how unfair the world is rather than on how good God is. As a pastor colleague reminded me, "you will never be able to see the goodness of God with a jealous eye." That's a powerful word.

We know the world isn't always a just place. Things are unfair. Personal situations differ; some hurt deeply while others seem to continue on without worry. I struggle with this parable because it's unfair in terms of my human response. But aren't we grateful that God is good - that God is generous - even when it may not make sense - even when we don't fully understand it? I'm so thankful that God is good and generous.

All of us have experienced God's goodness - God's generosity - as it's reflected in others. Sometimes it's the right word at the right time, the answer that comes when we've struggled, the relief and release to life eternal after suffering a long illness, the treatment that brings hope, the person who knows us and accepts us and yet calls us to be our best for God, the conviction of our hearts when we've been wrong, the forgiveness that we can offer and that we receive.

And the gift of salvation itself shows God's goodness. It's not based on who we are or what we've done. It's based on how good God is, and that's really good news!

The parable teaches us about grace and goodness - and reminds us that God will not be bargained with. We can't presume anything because it's about not us or our standards; it's about God's grace and how God works. Grace is freely given. Salvation

isn't an achievement that we mark off on our life goal list. Salvation - wholeness and healing that we find in Jesus Christ - is a gift to be celebrated and shared. And God's goodness is to be shared, too.

As with all of the fruit of the Spirit, goodness is shown in relationship and in community. In God's view, we are all beloved children, receiving grace, regardless of anything - with no exceptions. God calls us into a community of faith where grace abounds.

We seek belonging and connection, and we find that in one another through Jesus Christ. And when we nurture that relationship, we're bound to the Body of Christ where there is encouragement, strength, grace, and goodness. We walk our journeys together. They are not the same, but they are united in God's grace.

And the best part is that we learn more about God from listening to each other. What a gift it is to be in community connected by Jesus Christ and hear the witness of God's work in our lives! It really is in community that we learn about God's goodness more fully. I can talk about how God is good to me, but what a blessing to hear about God's goodness in your life because it only strengthens and deepens our faith.

May God help us celebrate goodness and reflect it even when we don't quite understand it. Isn't God good - all the time - God is good.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.