

“Cultivating Goodness”

Introduction: When I sketched out this summer’s sermon series on the fruit of the Spirit, I had no idea that the aspect of goodness would fall on the same Sunday as the beginning of our VBS adventure, which has as its theme, “Life is Wild, God is Good!” So, I guess the Spirit really is at work, in all sorts of ways, as we step together into the topic of goodness this week.

That said, goodness isn’t easy to get our arms around. Dictionary.com defines goodness in this way: “The quality of being morally good or virtuous.” “According to who?” we might want to ask. Trying to narrow it down by defining “good” doesn’t help us much: “To be desired or approved of.” “By whom?” would be our follow-up. To complicate matters even further, we have this general sense that because we’re not murderers, rapists or terrorists, that we’re all pretty good people. And yet if we come to understand that Jesus was crucified on account of my sins and your sins—past, present, and future—then what kind of good people are we really? When, therefore, we seek to try and understand what Spirit-produced goodness is all about, we need to start with the God who is good, asking ourselves how this God both defines goodness for us and helps us understand how to cultivate it.

I. The Goodness of Creation

A. Interestingly, the Bible wastes no time in directing us to think about goodness. “Good” is an adjective that appears frequently in the description of God’s creation. Giving us not the “how,” or even the “how long” of creation, but a picture of the finished product in a highly structured way, Genesis 1 describes six days of creation for us according to realms and rulers. The first three days picture the realms of night and day, water and sky, and land. The second three days reveal the rulers over those realms: sun, moon, and stars to rule the night and day; fish and birds to rule the water and sky; animals and people to rule the land. Ruling over everything is God, who takes up his residence on day 7 in what we might call his “cosmic temple.” As God gives this voice through the prophet Isaiah: “Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool” (Isa. 66:1).

B. There is much more we could say about all of this but the point for us to remember today is that six times in this picture of creation we read “God saw that it was good.” Then, in the seventh (the Hebrew number for perfection), we are told, “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good” (Ge. 1:31). Our understanding of good and goodness, therefore, begins and has to do with the way God has created things, and in the way all that he has created is to be in relationship and work together: the relationship between humanity and God, the relationship between humanity and itself, the relationships within humanity (gender, race, nationality, etc.), and the relationship between humanity and animals, earth, water and sky.

II. Goodness Fractured

A. Jump ahead to the work of the prophet Micah and we get a look at what goodness is not. We see, in fact, the way God’s good intention for creation has been fractured. Micah spoke on behalf of God in the late 700’s B.C. His audience occupied the territory called Judah, the southern half of what at that time had become the divided nation of Israel. Micah spoke in the form of a lawsuit in which God brought charges against his people. As the broader work of Micah reveals, God’s people were guilty of falsehood, injustice, and idolatry. Although Judah was enjoying a period of economic prosperity, wealth and power

had become concentrated in the hands of just a few, and such power was being used to oppress the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the immigrant. Homes and fields were being seized, workers were being exploited, and customers cheated. Judges were taking bribes and priests were charging exorbitant fees for their work. Through Micah, God wants his people to know that while the Judean stock market may have been on the rise, Judean society was on the decline. The goodness of creation, and the good relationships that God had intended, had all become severely broken.

B. Micah anticipates one response the people might have: “So, what can we give you, God? Is there a way we can settle this thing out of court?” Their suggestions escalate from some year-old calves, to thousands of rams, to ten thousand rivers of oil, to a first-born child. There is an absurdity to these offerings, as if a wealthy society might think it could buy God off, or bribe him to look the other way, if they could just give him enough to make him happy and leave them alone.

III. Goodness Fertilized

A. God has a different answer, a right way to pursue goodness, a way to fertilize the restoration of goodness. It begins with remembering his grace (v. 4), now, in the NT era, not just the redemption from slavery in Egypt through Moses, but from the slavery to sin that is ours through Jesus. As we do so, we confess the on-going sin in our lives that keeps our various relationships from being whole. We can't really pursue goodness without identifying the badness. Then, we are to move toward the healing of all those relationships in our lives as we pursue what God has shown us to be good: acting justly – seeking the well-being of all; loving mercy – offering undeserved favor to all who we meet; and walking humbly with God – trusting in and looking to him for guidance and direction.

Illustration: In his biography of John Adams, author David McCullough describes Adams as a voracious reader, one whose personal library exceeded 3,000 books, ranging in subject from gardening to theology to history to philosophy. But what is fascinating is how this great man of learning responded to his granddaughter Caroline when she began asking him questions about the “riddles” or meaning of life. Adams said, “You are not singular in your suspicions that you know but little. The longer I live, the more I read, the more patiently I think, and the more anxiously I inquire, the less I seem to know . . . Do justly. Love mercy. Walk humbly. This is enough.” [p. 650] (This would be a good way to pray for our current President and leaders!)

B. This last bit—walking humbly—is really the key here. It points forward to the invitation of Jesus, who says on numerous occasions to those seeking what is good, “Come, follow me.” Sometimes we excuse our sin with words like, “Well, I’m only human.” But the real problem is that we’re not human enough, if we understand that what a truly human life is to look like is revealed to us in the life that Jesus lived. God’s desires for living a good human life are found by reflecting on the life of Jesus. As we take in the stories about him, and the Scriptures which reflect on his life, our minds begin to be renewed and transformed, as Paul promises the Romans, such that the pattern of the world no longer defines what is good but we are able to discern what is good as we go along, in humble step, with the Spirit.

So, as we step into this coming week of VBS, and as the primary stories will bring us to walk with God as we see him walk with the Israelites through the wildness of the wilderness, may we have sightings of his goodness. Then, as we come to know what is good, let us extend such goodness to others, beginning with the children God has placed into our care.