

Fruitful Living: Goodness
Galatians 5:22-23; Matthew 19;
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Good morning! Well you all had more energy than the first service. I am Eric, the new guy on staff. I know there's a lot of exchange between people coming and going on vacations because it's summer, so if you haven't seen me, that's who I am. This is my second time preaching here which means that I've recovered from the scathing criticism of pastor - the lashes from the cat o' nine tails. They don't believe me...

So we're still talking through the 'Fruits of the Spirit' and this week we are on goodness. Three weeks ago I preached on peace, and I remember complaining a little bit about peace being one of those generic words that we use so often. It's kind of hard to understand specifically what it might mean in any context. Then I get 'goodness' or good which is even more so. It is probably one of the more generic words in the English language, which, as we talk about it as the 'Fruit of the Spirit,' presents a little bit of a challenge. When Paul says the 'Fruit of the Spirit' is goodness what does he mean, what does that mean?

I selected a text from Matthew, chapter 19, and what I want to do is actually use a round about way of looking at it. So when we come to that conclusion I think we'll have a little bit better understanding of what goodness is and maybe what goodness isn't.

A little bit of a background first before we jump into Matthew. Starting in about the period of Ezra and Nehemiah in the Old Testament, 400BC give or take, when the exiled Jews returned from Babylon and they began rebuilding Jerusalem. They founded a school of thought, or tradition, that began with the assumption that if God exiled us because we broke His commandments, which is the case, then we need to do everything in our power to avoid breaking the commandments. It makes sense, except they missed some of the parts where God spoke through the prophets saying He wants their heart. And over about 400 years, and by the time Christ was walking on the earth, there developed a very complicated organization and system of laws to keep people from breaking the actual commandments. So when you hear Jesus talk about the plucking of grain on the Sabbath, or healing a man on the Sabbath - that would be an example. They set up these laws so that you can't pluck grain, you can't do this, that and the other. Because if you can't do that you will never violate the commandment of remembering the Sabbath and keeping it holy.

So, in Matthew 19, verse 16 we have a guy coming up to Jesus, and the first words out of his mouth is "teacher." Teacher, or rabbi, immediately will set us off because the way that these laws developed over about 400 years, you get a lot of different opinions - kind of like you do in the church today on how things ought to be done. Rabbi Hillel says

one thing and Rabbi so and so says another thing and so on. So if he comes up to Jesus and says teacher, then that's immediately a red flag. He's probably going to approach the situation as if Jesus was another rabbi with another set of rules, which He's not. He says, "What good thing must I do to get eternal life?" The goal of these systems of laws, aside from not getting exiled again, is to basically become the ideal person, the ideal Jew, or to put it another way, to attain this sort of righteousness and perfection. That's done by fulfilling the laws and doing righteous deeds; my guess is that's what he's asking. He's saying, "Ok so where do you fit in to this, and where do I fit in?" What good thing can I do so I can pat myself on the back and say God thinks I'm good, I'll inherit eternal life and I can go on my way? Jesus' response derails that. He says, "Why do you ask me about what is good?" It's almost an obnoxious statement, because if He's Jesus - well I would think if I were going to ask anyone about what is good, I'd ask Jesus, but He side steps. He said, "There is only one who is good. If you want eternal life, obey the commandments." In a sense He's baiting the guy who is questioning Him by saying, "Obey the commandments," because he says right after that, "Which ones?" You know, what set, what school of thought do you come from?

The Pharisees have in general a school of thought, how do you obtain righteousness? And then within the groups of Pharisees there were all kinds of other teachers, other rabbis teaching variations on a theme. So he's trying to say, ok Jesus what commandments, which ones, what kinds? And Jesus I think is trying to prove a point starting here, and He continues on. He says, "Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honor your father and mother and love your neighbor as yourself." This guy would have known these commandments taken from the Ten Commandments since he was three, or something like that. These were THE commandments. And Jesus says, well just do those.

OK how do I avoid breaking these, what about this, what about that? That basically doesn't answer the question because the guy says, "Well all of these I've kept, what do I still lack? What good thing can I do to obtain righteousness?" So Jesus answers, "If you want to be perfect, go sell your possessions, give to the poor, then you'll have treasure in heaven; then come follow Me." When Jesus says perfect, He's kind of half joking or He kind of half means it, because the idea was that if you could complete all these laws, you could do these good things you could call yourself righteous or perfect. So Jesus says, "If you want this," which he does, "sell your possessions and follow Me." And here's where He sticks him because by giving this commandment to 'sell your possessions and follow me,' He reveals to that guy where His heart is. At the end of the text it says, "When the young man heard this he went away sad because he had great wealth, he couldn't do it. His heart was too wrapped up in his wealth and in his possessions, and he could not do what Jesus said." It's like this was the moment, if you wish to be perfect - yes, yes, yes... Can't do it, my heart isn't there.

I think that if goodness is a 'Fruit of the Spirit,' as Paul says, and if it was rooted in us doing good things, I think Jesus' response to how can I be perfect and what good thing

can I do to inherit eternal life, would have been profoundly different. I think He would have given him a list of commandments and meant it. I think that if He expected us to become righteous by doing these things, His teaching would have been much different, that when Jesus was walking around starting to undermine all these complicated systems of laws that don't actually grab the heart of people. I think that had goodness really been something we could obtain, He wouldn't have done that. I think it's the Lutheran tradition to come around and around and around and land at the gospel; that's what the drill us at seminary. But I think in this case it's legitimate. If our righteousness really depended on the things that we do by behaving and keeping the commandments, then we would be reading about a very different Jesus, and we would be living as a community of faith in a very different way.

The 'Fruit of the Spirit' is the fruit of the spirit. It's not the fruit of Eric or the fruit of Lisa or the fruit of Hal or the fruit of Betty. Which means that goodness or good things don't come from me, and I'm very certain that it means that God gives us His spirit. We are baptized in the Spirit, we are baptized into Jesus' death, we are resurrected with Him in life; and by doing that, we, for lack of a better word, receive something of a heart transplant. If goodness is at the core of God's heart, then in our baptism goodness becomes the core of our heart. And this is why I think the church does good things. Not because that's what we're supposed to do, (because by doing so we can somehow prove to God that we deserve eternal life or anything) it's just who we are. We have the Interfaith Hospitality Network. we have the World Vision. We do these things not because we have to, not because we've developed these complicated ways of justifying ourselves - which we do anyway, I know I do all the time. But every time I do I'm forgetting what my faith and my baptism actually mean, and that is at our heart we have Jesus Christ's and God's spirit. So when Paul says, "The fruit of the spirit is goodness," he's saying be who you are. That's probably a phrase you're going to hear a lot from me: be who you are. We are baptized into the death of Christ; we are raised in His life that will lead to eternal life. He's the one that did everything, so now we get to take part in that resurrection and as we go and live our lives during the week, we take part in the community that we have here at Redeemer. I mean, in a sense, we're continuing that resurrection, we're continuing what that means in our lives, that we are proclaiming the goodness of God and what He has done, and the goodness that He has given us, and we'll work to make the world a little better place. Not because that's what we do but because that's who we are, and it's just the right thing to do.

I think it's an important distinction and I paused for a second because I kind of got lost in it. It's really easy for the church, and especially the church of the United States as it were, to get very hung up 'we've got to do good things because we have to prove something to other people, and we have to do good things to prove something to ourselves so that we can be sure.' But, the only way we can really be sure to have the goodness of God is to be baptized and realize that Jesus took care of that already, Amen.