

The Fruit of the Spirit: Goodness: 07/25/2004

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“Goodness”

Most of you know that we are in a series on the “Fruit of the Spirit,” and I think that every part of the Fruit of the Spirit that we’ve studied up to this point has been extremely exciting.

We’ve talked about Love. Who doesn’t want that?

Joy. We’d pay for Joy in our world.

Peace. In the kind of lives that we live, we are desperate for Peace.

Patience. I’d like some of that yesterday.

But today, we are talking about Goodness—being good.

To tell you the truth, when I was thinking about this message, just the word “good” sounded a little dull to me. I was a little upset with the person who assigned the topics until I remembered that I was the one who assigned the topics.

I thought about how the word “good” has lost its wonder.

How was the movie?

It was good. Not great.

We write books called **From Good to Great**, because good is OK, but not really exciting. And that’s why one of Jesus’ most striking conversations centers on this word—“good.”

A man comes up to Jesus one day—this is recorded in Mark, Chapter 10:

Good teacher, he asked, what must I do to inherit eternal life?

Jesus, who has received lots of exalted titles in the New Testament:

- Son of the Most High,
- Son of David,
- Son of God,
- Messiah,

without blinking, stops this time and makes a big deal about that one little word.

Jesus says:

Good. Why do you call me good? No one is good—except God alone.

The man would not have expected this. This kind of greeting—"Good teacher"—was not at all uncommon in the ancient Orient, and he would have expected Jesus to be polite and to say something nice back to him like:

Well, noble seeker of truth...

He's just kind of fishing for a compliment. Every society has rules about this sort of thing. Let's say you are dating someone...I'll ask those of you who are single men here... let's say that the person you are dating asks you:

Do these clothes make my hips look big?

What are you supposed to say? Anyone can answer this. What are you supposed to say?

No! You don't look like you have any hips at all!

This guy is just being polite when he says "Good teacher." He doesn't really mean anything by it. It's like somebody going out the church door after the service and saying:

Good message, pastor.

They don't expect anyone to take that real seriously. They just have to say something.

Nice shoes

sounds kind of goofy.

Jesus doesn't respond politely. We often confuse goodness with being nice or polite, always getting someone to approve of us or like us. But God's Goodness is much wilder and stronger and more challenging and riskier than being nice and polite. Jesus doesn't respond politely. He takes this very seriously.

Why do you call me good? No one is good but God.

And you notice that he doesn't deny being good; he points out what's being talked about.

Then he begins to define "goodness."

You know the commands: Don't murder; don't lie; don't cheat; don't steal.

And the man says:

Teacher. All these I have kept since I was a boy. I grade surprisingly well on the morality factor. I've been good. I clear the "goodness bar" pretty easily.

And then Jesus says, just as this man is about to walk away:

just one more thing.

Do any of you remember watching an old TV show called "Columbo?" Columbo was a cop who was a lot smarter than he appeared on the surface. His zinger, when he was going after somebody, was always this line:

Just one more thing.

So here Jesus says:

Go sell everything you have and give the money away and come follow me.

At this, we are told, the man's face fell, and he went away sad because he had great wealth.

He wanted to be good, but he didn't want to be that good.

Reflecting upon this with his followers, Jesus said:

It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.

Now, for those of you who have been around churches for a while, you may have heard a story about how there was a gate in Jerusalem called a "needle gate," and that the only way a camel could get through it was to get down on its knees. The story is not true. There was no such gate. A New Testament scholar named Gary Birch writes about this. A rich guy looking for loopholes probably made up the story:

As long as I can be humble about it, down on my knees, I can hang on to as much of it as I want to.

It's a loaded story... a loaded story!

Back in Chicago, I knew a little group of people who had a lot of resources, and they formed a small community to ask themselves what Jesus wanted them to do with their Stuff. They called themselves "The Bruised Camels." Isn't that great? "The Bruised Camels." They figured that if they took Jesus really seriously, they would get a little bruised. When a camel goes through the eye of the needle, it's a little uncomfortable for the camel. In a community like ours, when people get serious about following Jesus, there will be some "bruised camels" around.

Now, there are a lot of dimensions of this story that we will look at some other time, but this morning our topic is "Goodness." I want to look at this statement of Jesus:

No one is good except God alone.

In the time left, before we come to the Communion table, I want to talk about two truths contained directly in this statement, and then I want to get to an invitation.

The first truth is this:

There is such a thing as absolute transcendence, and it is defined by God alone.

We live in a society that tends to talk about

- Right and Wrong,
- Good and Evil

as if they were just matters of personal taste ...as if it were all utterly relative:

- Chocolate or vanilla
- Pete's or Starbucks
- Coffee or tea.

You might have a preference; I might have a preference. Nobody's right; nobody's wrong. This is the prevailing mindset in much of our society.

I read a fascinating article in the New York Times recently about the aim of higher education. A distinguished professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago gave what is an annual address called **The Aims of Education** to the incoming class. He told them:

There are two goals that the University will not pursue. Don't expect them here. The first one is "providing truth." We expect you to figure it out. We expect you to figure out the truth, if there is one.

Do you know what the tuition is at the University of Chicago? I have a daughter who is in college right now. In another year, I'll have a couple of them in college. I know how much it costs. For that kind of money, I'd like a little truth. A little truth would be a good thing.

The second thing that this guy said you should not expect out of a university education was this:

Don't expect us to provide moral guidance. Elite universities operate on the belief that there is a clear separation between intellectual and moral purpose. Intellectual pursuits? We can know about those. Morality? They pursue the former while largely ignoring the latter. We are silent on the issue of morality.

His colleague, Stanley Fish, Dean of Arts and Sciences at the University of Chicago (kind of a "Big Gun" in higher education) was talking about the role of higher education on students in our day. This is a direct quote of what he

said:

You might be able to make them (students) into good researchers. You can't make them into good people, and you shouldn't try. You ought to aim at making them smart. You might be able to make them able to get rich. Don't aim at trying to make them morally good.

The title of the article that Fish wrote was "Aim Low." I think he's doing a pretty good job.

Jesus is into a different kind of education. He says there is such a thing as transcendent goodness. It is woven into creation and, deep in our hearts, we know.

C. S. Lewis in his book *Mere Christianity*, describes one of the ways that we know about what he calls "the Law of Human Nature." Now, how many of you have ever been in an argument or seen someone else in an argument? Lewis says that when people argue, they don't just say:

I've got a personal preference here. I could be wrong.

They say things like:

This is not fair.

Come on. You promised,

or

I was here first.

They say things that reflect that we have this inextinguishable sense of the way things ought to be—of what is right and what is wrong. We want justice. And we're actually quite passionate about it!

For example, you go to a Giants game. Let's say that Barry Bonds is up to bat. Some of you know that Barry Bonds gets walked a lot. Imagine that the Pitcher throws three pitches, and they're all three feet outside the strike zone, and the Umpire calls all three of them "strikes." In our country, we have a saying about what we think should happen to the Umpire in such a situation. We don't say:

Rebuke the Umpire.

We don't say:

Send the Umpire away for further remedial education.

What do we say? We say:

Kill the Umpire!

Why? Because we're serious about justice. We want there to be justice. When justice is violated, we become really angry!

My favorite story about justice was in the Los Angeles Times years ago. A guy named David Haggler was stopped by a police officer for speeding. He was just going a couple miles over the limit. He explained that he was in a big hurry and that, normally, he was a very careful driver. He had a legitimate reason for why he had to get someplace fast. Could he please not be stopped for a ticket this time? But the officer was playing hardball and said to him as he wrote the ticket:

Tell it to the Judge!

A couple of months later, in the summer, Haggler is serving as an Umpire in a summer baseball league. The season starts. On the first day, the first person up to the plate is the police officer that had given him the ticket. Now, all of a sudden, the officer is really nice and asks:

How did the thing with the ticket go?

And Haggler says:

You'd better swing at everything.

We love that story, because somebody is getting a little justice.

Lewis says:

The reality is that any time you see anybody argue, what you see is a conversation that reflects an innate sense that there is a way that things ought to be.

There is such a thing as "right" and such a thing as "wrong." We may not always agree on the details, but everybody carries with them a sense of "ought-ness." Where does that come from?

The Psalmist puts it like this:

Taste and see that the Lord is good.

He has never made a wrong call.

Lord God Almighty, true and just are all Your judgments.

The writers of Scripture never stopped wondering at the sheer goodness of God. When a mind is spiritually sane and right, it is filled with thoughts about

what a good God God is.

God has never held a grudge:

For the Lord is good. His mercy is everlasting.

He has never, in all eternity, spoken a deceptive word, never engaged in an ungracious deed. There has never been a prayer He hasn't heard, never been a repentant sinner He wouldn't forgive.

Good and upright is the Lord. All His ways are loving and faithful.

This was the one message that Jesus wanted people to understand about his Father.

And the Apostle John, when he's an old man summarizing Jesus' teachings, starts his letter off with this:

This is the message we have heard from him (Jesus) and declare to you, "God is light and in Him there is no darkness at all."

He's never had a dark thought, said a dark word, or done a dark thing. That's our God. Do you ever wonder what God is like? God is light. God never aims low. Goodness exists and God defines the category. He is all good all the time.

But then there's another part of Jesus' statement that is not such good news. According to Jesus, outside of God who else fits into that "holy, good, all-good" category? Nobody.

No one is good, but God alone.

Now this is where people start to check out. There is actually an area of research in Social Science—one of the most documented findings in any of the social sciences—that talks about our difficulty with Jesus' statement. It is something that social psychologists call **The Self-Serving Bias**.

This refers to the universal human tendency to underestimate "my shortcomings," to compare myself to other people and think I'm doing better than I actually am, to take more credit for stuff than I really deserve, to exaggerate my abilities and my successes, and it is one of the most widely documented findings in all of social science.

There was a survey of 829,000 high school students a while ago, and they were asked this question:

How do you rate yourself, compared to other students, in your ability to get along with other people? Would you say that you are above average or below average?

What percentage of these high school students actually thought they were above average in their ability to get along with other people? Take a guess. By definition, 50 percent should be above, and 50 percent should be below average. The actual answer: 100 percent! One hundred percent of high school students said:

I'm above average in my ability to get along with other people.

Not only that, but 25 percent of high school students estimated that they were in the top 1 percent in their ability to get along with other people.

It's not just high school students who have a problem with this. Take an academic setting. Ninety-five percent of all faculty members rated themselves as "Above Average" in their performance as teachers and scholars. These are real smart people. At a place like Stanford University, you might wonder:

Why is there the kind of conflict that there is when it comes to issues of tenure and promotion?

People in the hospital as the result of an accident that they caused by driving badly rate themselves as "Above Average" drivers. More than 90 percent of preachers who have to talk about texts like Romans 12 where it says:

Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but consider yourself with sober judgment,

consider themselves to be "Above Average" preachers.

A last example: When this concept of a "Self-serving Bias" is explained to people so that they understand it, the vast majority of people say that they are above average in their ability to handle the "Self-serving Bias."

This is a universal problem, and, in my humble opinion, nowhere is the problem of the "Self-serving Bias" more serious than when it comes to people's assessment of how they are doing on the "Goodness Factor."

Good teacher, what do I need to do?

Jesus walks him through the Commandments. The average person thinks he or she is twice as likely to obey the Ten Commandments as anybody else ...twice as likely to obey the Ten Commandments!

All these I have kept since I was a child.

And, of course, as long as I compare myself to other people, I can always find somebody else who is doing worse than I am and think I grade out

pretty well.

But we have this God who, when it comes to the Goodness Factor, never aims low, and He's never had a dark thought, and He's never said a dark word and He's never done a dark deed, and that's His plan for His creation.

For those of you who know the Bible pretty well, when in the Bible did anybody ever encounter God—this holy transcending God—and come away saying:

You know, from a moral standpoint, I'm doing surprisingly well.

Did that ever happen in the Bible? Isaiah said:

Woe is me for I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips and I have seen the living God.

When he realized who Jesus was, Peter said:

Get away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.

One day, the Apostle Paul, who thought he was doing pretty well, had a blinding vision of the reality of God, and later on, in the book of Romans, he said:

There is no one righteous. There is no one who does good all the time, not even one of us.

The reality according to the writers of Scripture—people who have encountered God—is that in light of what God intended the human soul to be, sin has devastated it to tragic levels.

There is such a thing as transcending goodness, and God defines the category; nobody else is in that category.

And then this invitation:

Jesus is now receiving, into His community, people who do not clear the "Goodness Bar" on their own. Jesus comes down to earth, and His message is not "Try harder." His message is:

Come be my friend, and I'll help you change.

That's what started to happen. He started changing people. There's a corrupt, greedy tax collector named Zacchaeus. Jesus becomes his friend, and he decides to go straight. He becomes honest, and he becomes generous. There's a woman who is guilty of adultery. She becomes one of Jesus' friends, and she becomes faithful. There's a self-righteous persecutor of the church named Saul (Paul), and he becomes its faithful servant. Jesus starts a kind of "goodness revolution" that changed the ancient world.

I was thinking about that this week, and I was thinking:

What if He started a Goodness Revolution in California?

Can you imagine what California would be like if there were a "Goodness epidemic" that swept through it? And Arnold Schwarzenegger and the legislature would all just get along? No one would have to lock a door or lock a car. Nobody would have to worry no matter what kind of neighborhood they were in. No child in a city would have to recoil at something that sounded like it might have been a gunshot. No family dynamics in a whole state would cause tears. Silicon Valley would become famous for its culture of humble generosity. Hollywood would make films filled with moral beauty and courage.

What if there were a Goodness Revolution in the church, and people voluntarily gave up the best parking spots and voluntarily gave up the best seats, and unity flowed all the time, and sermons always ended on time? What if there were a Goodness Revolution in the church, and little groups of "bruised camels" would start going through the Eye of the Needle, and resources would start flowing to places like East Palo Alto?

Bring it down... a little more intimate. What if you were to ask Jesus to do a Goodness Revolution in you? In your heart? In your relationships? In your eyes? In your mouth? In your work? What if Jesus were to do a Goodness Revolution in you?

And that brings us to this table. It seems a funny thing to me how a word that can be almost superficial in one context can be life changing in another. Many times we use words so glibly. As many of you know, my son, Johnny, is a surfing addict, and before he goes surfing, his mom always says the same thing to him. Before he goes out to the water, she always says the same two words:

Be careful.

Do you think that ever makes a dent in him? Do you think there's ever a time when he's out on the ocean, and he says:

Well, I was going to go for this wave, but Mom said, "Be careful," so I guess I'll just duck under it and let it go.

No. It never makes a dent. It's just something mothers say.

When parents drop off their kids at a baby-sitter, they will say to the kids:

Be good.

Think that ever makes a dent? Think any kid's ever said:

Well. I was going to stick a spaghetti noodle up my brother's nose, but Mom said, "Be good," so I guess I won't.

It's just something parents say. Except once...

More than ten years ago, I saw a documentary where an old woman was being interviewed. She was about eighty years old, had white hair and was wrinkled. She was being interviewed because when she was a young girl, she had been on the Titanic. She and her mom had climbed into a lifeboat, but her dad stayed on the ship—on the Titanic—and he knew he was never going to see his daughter again. He knew he would die, and she would grow up without him. He stood on the deck of that ship, and he looked at his little girl, and he said the last words he would ever say to her:

I love you. Be a good girl. Be a good girl.

It had been eighty years, and she said there had never been a day in her life that she didn't think about those words. They weren't just words, because he gave his life for her, and because she had seen what Goodness looked like.

So we come to this table . . . and we remember, at this table, He gave His life.