

## Risky Goodness

Read: Matthew 19:16-26; Luke 21:1-4

It's not meant to be wise. It's not meant to be taken seriously. Sometimes when you are saying goodbye to someone they say, "Be good; if you can't be good, be careful." Anyone who actually thinks this is a foundation upon which to build an ethical life is as dumb as a post. Most of the time, the saying is just a facetious nod, a knowing smirk between one sinner and another. Of course goodness is not a trivial matter when you get down to living your life in the trenches, down where the trials, the difficulties, the sufferings, and the losses are real and costly. Amidst all the evils of this world, where do we find a place for goodness? The short answer is: the place where goodness is most needed is among all the evils of this world. Goodness is actually one of our main weapons in spiritual conflicts, whether human or demonic, but before we get into that, we need to do a little leg work.

One of the things that strikes me in our exploration of the fruits of the Spirit so far is that each one has both the quality of a noun and of a verb. The fruits of the Spirit don't just hang passively on the tree of the Holy Spirit who is their source. We don't stand admiringly under the tree and say, "Oh look! There's a shiny red love apple. Isn't it beautiful? Oh look! There's a pear of patience. How serenely it hangs there." The fruits of the Spirit not only give us a living demonstration of Holy Spirit's character, they actively begin to shape our character, and when we are truly alive, both our character and Holy Spirit's character are anything but passive. The Spirit is dynamic, and as we connect ever more deeply with the Spirit, we become dynamic as well.

So we have learned so far that the love of the Lord by the Spirit's application within our hearts is not merely sentimental; it is sacrificial. Along with Christ and Holy Spirit, we become more willing to suffer for love, to lay down our lives for our friends. We lay them down as we offer tangible gifts of our time, talents, and our treasure to lift up one another. Through love we begin to value each other for who we are in God, and we learn to value God above all else.

We've seen that joy gives us strength in trials. We've seen peace come as a powerful gift against worry and anxiety. It is a peace so deep we can't figure out just how powerful it really is; it passes understanding. We've seen patience get in action as endurance when difficulties seem to go on and on in life. Patience is both a noun and a verb. We've seen kindness take the stage as enduring mercy that refuses to give up or give in under pressure. Together we've recited the refrain, "His steadfast love endures forever." Kindness is something we do. Kind is who and what we become through Holy Spirit ministering down in the depths of our souls.

We've seen that these simple words, love, joy, peace, patience, and kindness when translated from the original languages of the Bible, from Hebrew and Greek, are capable of multiple nuances of meaning. So it is with goodness. Goodness in Greek can mean good, but it can also signify generosity, which is how the NRSV now translates it in this list of fruits of the Spirit we are following from Galatians 5. Other and some older translations use the word goodness.

Let's look at goodness through the lens of the story of the rich young man that shows up in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, all basically in the same form except for how it begins. In all three versions it says that Jesus was heading on a journey when a young man ran up to him asking a question about goodness. In Matthew he simply says, "Teacher, what good must I do to inherit eternal life?" Mark and Luke word the opening slightly differently. There, instead of a question about how to be good, the young man says, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" I think by that he means to show honor and respect to Jesus but Jesus perceives he is not going deep enough and is in danger of wandering off on the wrong path. So Jesus replies, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone." Jesus is offering the young man an opportunity to recognize his divine nature. Jesus is not merely another inspired rabbi. He is far greater. But the rich young man is really not in a position spiritually to seize the moment. So Jesus kindly begins to take him deeper.

No doubt this is a fine young man. And no doubt his neighbors thought so too, since wealth was for them a sign of God's approval. In the conventional

theology of the day, the rich were rich because they lived a righteous life under the law. The problem with legalistic spirituality is you never know if you are quite good enough.

Living under the law, trying to live up to all the supposed rules and regulations, we are always comparing ourselves to others, always taking stock of our performance, always trying to assure ourselves that surely our righteousness is surely good enough for God. It is, isn't it? It was the same back then as it is today. And we find in that system that assurance of our salvation is an elusive thing. How many people live with the constant uncertainty regarding their salvation? They hope they are good enough, but they just aren't sure. Perhaps that describes someone here today. And the uncertainty gains critical force when life takes a turn for the worse, when the heat is on, and when the trials come our way. And we all know trials do come our way.

Jesus deftly picks up on his spiritual anxiety and leads him forward. "You know the commandments." Then he walks him through the second table of the law, with all of the "don't do this-es and don't do that's, all the ethical demands of the law." Jesus wants to take him to a place beyond ethics, to a place where he actually enters the Kingdom of God, where he will have treasure in heaven, and where he will be so unencumbered by worldly concerns that he will actually be able to follow Jesus. The only things standing in his way are his possessions. Jesus gives him the opportunity to do good to the poor by letting go, by expressing true goodness through generosity. "Sell all, give to the poor, and follow me," says Jesus, "and you will have treasure in heaven."

Who among us can judge the young man? How many of us are willing to release treasure we can see for treasure that we can't see? We can accumulate, count, measure, and store our earthly treasures. We cannot estimate the value of heavenly treasure. It is unseen. It is invisible. But as Paul wrote, what is seen is temporary; what is unseen is eternal. All we can do with that is trust in the goodness of God.

So now we have come to the source of our spiritual power. You will bear the fruit of goodness only insofar as you are connected to the source of goodness,

which by the way, has very little to do with your performance. The old man, the man of flesh remains acquisitive and obsessed with worldly things. The old man, the person before amazing grace apprehends him may try very hard to be good. He may even pull it off most of the time. But when he or she fails, the defeat is depressing at best.

When you are connected to the goodness of God's heart through the Holy Spirit, you begin to live life in a whole new way. A moment ago we read the brief little story about the rich people giving to the Temple treasury out of their abundance. In other words, their offering involved no risk on their part. Though their gifts were sizable, even impressive, there was plenty more where that came from. They could be, and probably were admired by their fellow Presbyterians for how generous they were.

Then along came a poor widow who put two pennies in the offering box. She gave her two cents worth which would do nothing significant to pay the bills or replace the boiler or repair the old elevator. The one distinguishing mark of her offering was this: it was everything she had. She wasn't meeting a need; she was offering her heart. And Jesus sat up and took notice. She was an example of risky generosity. And risky generosity proceeds from a heart that is thoroughly convinced about the goodness of God.

I'm sorry it has become a cliché, but it has become a cliché because it is true; we say, "God is good all the time; all the time, God is good." It has a nice ring to it, yes? There's a neat little symmetry in that. God is good all the time; all the time, God is good. But be careful. Is God good on the day you are told you have stage 4 cancer? Is God still good when the police call to say they are sorry but someone you love has just been killed in a fatal car crash? Is God good on the day you lose your job? Is God good on all the days the terrorists bomb and burn and behead innocent people, and deranged people shoot and kill for no good reason? Fill in your own calamity. Is God good all the time, even when we can't see it and under the conditions where we don't experience life as good, not good at all?

At such places and in such times, our faith must be muscular. The question that the flesh demands to be answered is, "If God is good, why is there evil?" In faith, given and guided by the Holy Spirit, the question is different. The Holy Spirit, developing within us the gift of goodness, will cause us to ask this question: "In the midst of these conditions, how can I manifest the goodness of God. As one man put it, "Goodness is our mission statement." We exist to be importers and exporters in this broken world. We import the goodness of God into our own hearts in order to export goodness in the midst of a world largely gone mad. Every circumstance, no matter what, is an opportunity to display the goodness of God which is the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

As with all the other fruits, goodness is at the heart of God, all three members of the Divine Trinity. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are good, through and through. There has never been, nor will there ever be a day where God will forsake goodness for something else. God is good, all the time! As we get to know Holy Spirit better and better, we can expect to develop the awareness like never before the Holy Spirit's heart is good, nothing but good, all the time. To follow such goodness will involve us in risky goodness, but to follow anything less is in the end deadly. We have a choice to make and make it every day we must. Will we be vessels for the goodness of God or will we go away sorrowful to seek comfort in lesser possessions which we are too fearful to relinquish. In the end to become generous in goodness is to secure untold blessings for ourselves. The choice is yours. By God's goodness, choose wisely and well.