

“The Fruit of the Spirit: Goodness”
Romans 12:9-21
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First Presbyterian Church of Spruce Pine

“Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control - against such things there is no law” (Galatians 5.22-23). With this list the Apostle Paul describes 9 ways the Holy Spirit shows up in us and in the world. Think of these as our super powers! Today’s focus is on goodness, and in the coming weeks we will finish out with faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

This morning we turn to Paul’s letter to the church in Rome. Out of all of Paul’s letters in the New Testament, Romans ranks as the longest and most theologically dense of them all. After many long and detailed chapters about sin and salvation, justification and election, Paul finally makes the turn to application here in chapter 12. In other words, given the theological analysis of the first 11 chapters, Paul finally gets to the part where he says, “OK, this is how we are to live this out!” Chapter 12 begins with a great transition word, “Therefore...” And what comes next is a list of very direct and practical instructions about how we are to live out our faith, how we are to bear the fruit of the Spirit. Let’s turn now to chapter 12, beginning with the 9th verse. I invite you to read along with me the parts that are in bold.

Romans 12:9-21 *Common English Bible*

Love should be shown without pretending. Hate evil, and hold on to what is good. Love each other like the members of your family. Be the best at showing honor to each other. Don’t hesitate to be enthusiastic—be on fire in the Spirit as you serve the Lord!

Be happy in your hope, stand your ground when you’re in trouble, and devote yourselves to prayer. Contribute to the needs of God’s people, and welcome strangers into your home.

Bless people who harass you—bless and don’t curse them. Be happy with those who are happy, and cry with those who are crying. Consider everyone as equal, and don’t think that you’re better than anyone else. Instead, associate with people who have no status. Don’t think that you’re so smart. Don’t pay back anyone for their evil actions with evil actions, but show respect for what everyone else believes is good.

If possible, to the best of your ability, live at peace with all people. Don’t try to get revenge for yourselves, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath. It is written, *Revenge belongs to me; I will pay it back, says the Lord.* Instead, If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink. By doing this, you will pile burning coals of fire upon his head. Don’t be defeated by evil, but defeat evil with good.

When you hear the word “good” or “goodness” what comes to your mind? Perhaps it's the voice of your parents who told you to “be good” or to “do good” when you went off to school or when you were outside playing with your friends. Perhaps you worked hard to be a “good” student or a “good” basketball player, or you were sent to church to learn how to be a “good” person. You see, in English the word good can be used in many ways, each with a different meaning. Your tires may be good for another 6 months, the joke you just heard could be considered good, and if the waitress asks if you need a refill you might respond, “No thanks, I’m good!” We can talk about people being good cooks, good athletes, good liars, and even good bank robbers.

One of the first songs I remember learning at Vacation Bible School as a kid is the simple song, “God is so good.” Don’t worry, I’m not going to sing it - but the words simply are, “God is so good, God is so good, God is so good, he’s so good to me.” Then the other verses repeat “God answers prayers” and “God cares for me.” While there’s something beautiful in the simplicity of such songs, I’m afraid when it comes to understanding the goodness of God, songs like these come up a little short. So this morning I invite you to explore with me the type of goodness Paul describes as the fruit of the Spirit, goodness that certainly describes our relationship with God, but more importantly, goodness that describes our lives in relationship to others.

In his blog [Getting Practical about Goodness](#), Dr. John Bechtel writes that “Good fruit is easy to identify. A good watermelon is red, juicy, and sweet. A good apple is crunchy and tasty.... [But] Spiritual fruit is trickier. When the apostle Paul scrolled out a list of character traits that constitute the ‘fruit of the Spirit,’ he included obvious items like love and joy. But “goodness” can seem [to be] a bit vague...” The Greek word translated “goodness” in the spiritual fruit list found in Galatians 5 is the word *aga-tho-su-nē*. It only appears four times in the New Testament, but it stems from an adjective – *agathos* – that shows up over 100 times! ([Getting Practical about Goodness](#), Dr. John Bechtel). *Agathos* is a very versatile word and describes excellence in many ways. In the gospels fertile soil (Luke 8:8) is described as good, as well as trees that produce many fruit (Matthew 7:17). A rich man might boast of the “good things” he had accumulated in his life (Luke 16:25). And Jesus said that God “causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good (Matthew 5:45). In this sense good is referring to moral uprightness, the good qualities of a person.

While these examples can still seem to be a little vague, when we zero in on Paul’s use of goodness in Galatians and how the word shows up in our passage from Romans today, we see something important. *Goodness is not just some abstract concept that we are to strive for in our pursuit of excellence. Goodness isn’t just a measure of how we are doing as individuals but it involves how we are doing in relationship to other people.* That’s why goodness is sometimes translated as generosity in the list of the fruit of the Spirit. Goodness is about loving and kind and generous actions towards our neighbors, especially those who are in need. This type of goodness has to do with how we respond to others, and it is key to how we live our lives as Christians. In our American culture Christianity has unfortunately been distorted into a “me and God” thing. In our hyper-individualistic world where we are attached to our i-phones, technology makes it easy to stay home where we can shop and play games and watch movies all without seeing

our neighbors. It's no surprise that America is increasingly [a lonely nation](#). We are losing our basic connection to community, and when it comes to our faith we are tempted to think that it's all about God and Me.

But in today's passage from Romans, Paul makes it clear that living a Christian life is all about how we relate to others, and once again we see that it all starts with love! This is what genuine, real love looks like:

It's hating what is evil, and holding on to what is good. It's not just tolerating others, but actually honoring them. (Loving others like they are members of your own family!) It's being happy in hope, standing your ground when you're in trouble, and devoting yourselves to prayer. But it's not just "thoughts and prayers" - it's also contributing to the tangible needs of God's people. It's radical hospitality: welcoming not just your friends but even strangers into your home. It's being empathetic: being happy with those who are happy, and crying with those who are in grief. It's about humility: considering everyone as your equal, and not thinking that you're better than anyone else. And it's about peacemaking: to the best of your ability, living at peace with all people.

Each of these points could be a sermon unto itself, but that is not on our agenda today! Rather, I want us to appreciate the fact that the call to love and goodness is both radical and very practical. It's a radical calling to respond to Jesus' life and teachings by putting them into practice with the neighbors around us - the neighbors we have beside us in the pews, members of the church family, as well as the neighbors we encounter at school or in the grocery store parking lot. Just as God in Christ has extended us goodness, welcoming us in when we were lost, so we too are to extend the same kind of goodness and love to others.

As I mentioned last week, it is God who always takes the initiative first, and so in response to God's action towards us we are to reflect the same kind of radical goodness and love to others. In a world in need of good news, we are to bear the fruit of God's love and goodness in real ways. We may be the only Bible some people ever read, so the goodness and love we share every day makes a difference.

In the 16th century [St. Teresa of Ávila](#) put it like this:

Christ has no body but yours, No hands, no feet on earth but yours - Yours are the eyes with which he looks compassion on this world; Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good; Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world. Christ has no body but yours!

In his Sermon on the Mount Jesus spells out in detail the radical way of love. He redefines what goodness is all about. It's not being good to those who deserve it, or those you may like. No, with Jesus love requires much more. "You have heard that it was said, 'You must love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who harass you" (Matthew 5.43-44). In today's passage Paul echoes Jesus' words:

Do not return evil for evil - do not buy into the cycle of revenge!

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

David LaMotte - a singer, songwriter and peace activist friend of mine - shares a modern day true story of what overcoming evil with good looks like in his poetry-book called “White Flour” ([White Flour](#) book and resources).

“On May 26, 2007 members of a white supremacist group went to Knoxville, Tennessee to hold a rally in a public park there. They held signs that insulted not only African-Americans, but Jews as well. One sign had a picture of a noose, with the words ‘insert neck here’ written beside it. As is usually the case at such racist rallies, the counter-protesters outnumbered the racists by far. In this case, though, they didn’t try to shout them down. They didn’t meet anger with more anger. Rather, the local activists met hatred with humor. The Coup Clutz Clowns had prepared carefully for the day, rehearsed, and brought plenty of props and costumes.”

You see, instead of hatred, they brought lots of humor! When the KKK and neo-nazis began to shout “White Power” the clowns pretended to hear it as “White Flour” and as they shouted “white flour” they poured bags of white flour into the air! Then later in the march they acted as if they heard the white supremacists saying “White Flowers” and so (you guessed it!) they threw beautiful white petals in the air. In these and other humorous ways the protesters flipped the script. Instead of giving the KKK what they wanted, a stage for anger and hatred, the clowns did not take the bait. They matched hate with humor and the result was that the marchers decided to go home early. This type of creative response is at the heart of the non-violent movement embodied by Gandhi and then Martin Luther King, Jr.

Lamotte ends the poem with this stanza:

*And what would be the lesson of that shiny southern day?
Can we understand the message that the clowns sought to convey?
Seems that when you’re fighting hatred, hatred’s not the thing to use!
So here’s to those who march on in their big red floppy shoes.*

This morning as we consider the role goodness plays in the fruit of the Spirit, I pray that we may stay open to the radical call of love in our lives:

Where are we called to practice radical hospitality?
Where are we called to meet hatred with love?
Who are those around us who need a companion in joy
And who around us needs a companion in their tears?

Friends, remember the good news! God’s gracious love sets us free to be in and for the world, not trying to earn God’s love or approval, but finding ways to extend that same love and approval to those who need healing, to those who need goodness, to those who need love.

Thanks be to God. Amen.