

The Ripe Stuff sermon series  
#5 – Goodness – Luke 6:43-45  
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I'm glad the Boy Scouts are with us today in worship, because I need some help with his one. In this sermon series, we're looking at the fruit of the spirit as laid out by Paul in Galatians – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Today, we're talking about the one that I think is the hardest to define: goodness. What is "goodness"? What does it mean to be "good"? The scouts have a law that might help us out here. A scout is trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent. I'd say if a person lives out those qualities, they would be a good person. But based on the fact that "clean" is on that list, I may have to disqualify myself.

Is that what Paul meant by "good"? A lot of times we can dig into the original language for some help, but not here. The Greek word for "goodness" is only used two three other times in the New Testament, so it's hard to get a contextual understanding of what it means. But on the flipside, the concepts of "good" and "goodness" are mentioned over 100 times in the New Testament, with several different Greek words being put to use. This happens a lot. In English we have one word for "love," but the Greek had several, depending on the kind of love you're talking about. We say we love our parents and we love hamburgers, but that's not the same kind of love, unless it's a REALLY good hamburger! So, when we say something or someone is "good," what do we mean?

Let's take a car, for example. I drive a 2007 Toyota Matrix with about 170,000 miles on it. What can I say, I like living in luxury! And to me, it's a good car. What I mean by that is that it does what a car is supposed to do. It gets me from point A to point B and has caused me very little trouble. But someone who was hoping to haul bricks or move furniture would not think it was a good car. And an antique car collector wouldn't think a 2007 Toyota Matrix was a good car. Maybe the concept of "good" is in the eye of the beholder. What makes something or someone "good"?

Good can mean "competence," like "He's good at soccer." Or it can mean someone who follows the rules. "Be a good girl and eat all your vegetables." Or it can mean a certain kind of quality of living. "They really live the good life!" Being good can mean a lot of things, but I think Paul meant more than competence or rule-following when he says that one of the fruit of the spirit is "goodness."

I think what Paul means by "good" is both a disposition within a person and how that disposition gets lived out. A person who is good has certain qualities about them. They have integrity, they do what's right, they are authentic, they are genuine, they are transparent. Thankfully, nothing on that list about being clean! A good person may be hard to describe, but we know one when we meet one. Ben Buckley, who's funeral was yesterday, was a good man. There are a lot of good people in this church.

But being good is more than about what a person thinks; it's also about how they act. One commentator said that goodness is "kindness in action." Goodness involves deliberate deeds that are helpful to others. A good person does things, even at their own expense, that promotes the happiness of others. A good person is upright, honorable, and noble. They have strong ethics and morals. They do the right thing even when it hurts.

I think I just described Jesus! Jesus is the only person I can think of that lived out all of these qualities. Not even Ben Buckley was perfect, and neither are we. In fact, according to Paul, we are anything but good, which throws a real wrinkle in our discussion. In Romans, Paul says, “For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.” Paul has a lot to say about the sinful nature and how we must constantly fight against it in order to do what’s good. You could say that our lack of goodness is the whole reason Jesus died on the cross, so that we wouldn’t have to suffer the penalty for not being good. But if goodness is such a struggle, why would Paul list it as a fruit of the spirit? Where can we get this goodness?

Some people look within for goodness, thinking that if they can just work hard enough, they can make themselves good. That’s the whole point beyond the miles of self-help books that are out there. I went to the bookstore this week to check out some of those books. I walked into the store and said to the clerk, “Can you show me where I can find the self-help books?” and she said, “Well, that would kind of defeat the purpose, wouldn’t it?” The self-help movement would have us believe that if we just are mindful enough or do enough yoga or write enough in our journals, we can be good people.

Here’s the danger in that. If we do those things, we may start to believe that we can make ourselves good. And if we can make ourselves good, well, then who needs Jesus? We would still come to church, of course, but we wouldn’t come because we needed help being good. We Christians are so skilled at acting like we have it all together sometimes, like we’ve got this sin thing under control. And when we slip up, well, that’s between God and me. I’m still a good person. But what the story of the Bible tells us over and over again is that, in this epic narrative, we’re not the “good guys.” We’re the ones who rebel, who eat the forbidden fruit, who try to build towers, who whine and complain, who disobey God’s laws, who ignore the prophets, and who take the love made flesh that God gave us and nail him to the cross. We are not monsters. We are not demons. We are not mass murderers. But we are not good, either.

So, we can’t make ourselves good from within. But our goodness also cannot be determined by external factors. What does it mean to be good by worldly standards? In our punitive society, we can be good simply by not being bad. If we obey the laws, we’re considered good. When I was in high school, the police in my town started a program where, if they saw a car obeying the traffic laws, they would stop and give the driver cash. So, what did my friends and I do? We filled up our gas tanks and drove around town like little old ladies, stopping at every stop sign, going the speed limit, using our turn signals. Did that make us good drivers? Maybe, but as soon as the program ended, we were back to speeding and driving recklessly, like a teenager is supposed to do. We have laws that tell us what it is bad to do, but little guidance on what is good to do.

This being good stuff is hard, isn’t it? If we can’t make ourselves good, and being good in the world is only a legal requirement, how can we be good as Paul calls us to be? You would think we could turn to Jesus, but even that is a challenge. When the rich young ruler approaches Jesus with a question, the ruler says, “‘Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’” And Jesus says to him, “‘Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.’” So, according to Jesus, only God is good. That seems like a pretty high bar to set for us, doesn’t it?

But remember this: we are made in God’s image. It tells us that right there in Genesis. So, if that is true, then that means we have within us the capacity to be like God, to reflect God’s goodness in our own lives. Paul may be right in that we struggle to live out the goodness within us, but there is goodness within us! Each one of us has the potential to be good like God is good.

Paul writes in Ephesians, “For we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works.” And he writes in Romans, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.” And Jesus caps it all off when he says in the Sermon on the Mount, “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” We do good when we let our light shine, when we illuminate the dark places in this world, when we offer a beacon of hope to those who can’t see what the future holds. When we give of ourselves so that someone else knows God’s love for them, we are doing good.

The best definition we have of doing good comes from Matthew 25. In his parable, Jesus says, “Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ Then the righteous (also translated as “good”) will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’

Doing good may seem like common sense, but as Paul points out, we have to be intentional about it, or else our selfish, sinful nature will take over. We can’t make ourselves good, so we have to rely on a source greater than ourselves in order to do the good works we were created to do. That source is the love and grace of God shown to us through Jesus Christ, who saved us from ourselves in order to be the people God created us to be. We don’t do good in order to be saved. We do good because we were saved. And every day, there are opportunities for us to do good.

I don’t know that we’ve made any progress today on understanding what “goodness” means. It’s one of those things that’s hard to define, but you know it when you see it. Do people see goodness in you? Do they see integrity, authenticity, generosity? Do they see you do what is right, even if it’s not popular or self-beneficial? God has been good to us, so we are called to be good to others. As Paul says in Galatians, let us never tire of doing good, because when we do so, we are showing this dark world what the light of Christ looks like. So, you want to be good? Feed the hungry. Give a drink to the thirsty. Welcome the stranger. Give clothing to those who don’t have any. Care for the sick. Visit those in prison. That’s what Jesus calls us to do. Let us never tire of doing the good works that Christ has called us to do. There’s enough bad in this world, isn’t there? Let’s be good to each other.