

Galatians 5 v 22 The fruit of the Spirit is goodness

Introduction

American cartoonist George Clark had a particular gift for drawing attention to the weaknesses of our sinful human nature in his creations. One of his cartoons displayed a picture of two extremely large ladies enjoying tea together. The woman who was speaking was most enthusiastic in commending the weight watchers class she regularly attended. The success of this approach to weight control she declared a great success. Her actual words in the cartoon were as follows: 'My reducing club is a great success. We've lost 148 pounds. However, none of it is mine personally.' It may have been an enjoyable social experience to meet with this group of people week by week, but the purpose of that particular venture had been lost to the individual depicted in the cartoon (Charles Hembree, *Fruits of the Spirit*, p.77). This flavour of the fruit of the Spirit is probably the hardest to define, especially when we translate αγαθωσυνη as *goodness*. Goodness in English is an incredibly general term that can be understood in different ways depending on the context in which the word is used. Unless we define the term carefully we can miss what the apostle is saying to us.

There is a well-known example in the Gospels of a conversation between a rich young man and Jesus. In his introductory remarks this young man used this term *good* with respect to Jesus, and undoubtedly did so as a mark of genuine respect for Jesus. Mark 10:17-23 gives us the details. ¹⁷As Jesus started on His way, a man ran up to Him and fell on his knees before Him. 'Good teacher,' he asked, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' ¹⁸'Why do you call Me good?' Jesus answered. 'No one is good – except God alone.' ¹⁹You know the commandments: "You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honour your father and mother." ²⁰'Teacher,' he declared, 'all these I have kept since I was a boy.' ²¹Jesus looked at him and loved him. 'One thing you lack,' he said. 'Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow Me.' ²²At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth. ²³Jesus looked round and said to His disciples, 'How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!' A similar confusion with respect to this word 'good' occurs in the challenge often put to Christians in some version of the following dilemma: 'Why does God allow bad things happen to good people?' The recent example of that in my experience came in the open-air where an aggressive atheist was convinced he had undermined the Christian faith, and God in particular, by his point with respect to what happened during the flood in Noah's day. His argument was that although no-one could dispute God's right to wipe out wicked people, it was outrageous that any innocent person could die in the flood. There must have been young babies alive in the world at the time, therefore, God could not be good and allow them to die at the same time. There are many levels with hindsight at which a response could be given. We could start by speaking of the impact of 'original sin' [the bias towards sin within us] as opposed to 'actual sin' [deliberate acts of wrongdoing]. Or bring out the implications of his own acknowledgement that we are all sinners; Jeremiah 17:9 states: *The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?* Or in Psalm 14:1-3 David writes: *The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.' They are corrupt, their deeds are vile; there is no one who does good.* ²*The Lord looks down from heaven on all mankind to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God.* ³*All have turned away, all have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one.* Paul cites these verses and more besides in his summary of human sinfulness in Romans 3:9-23, in which he concludes: *There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, ²³for all have sinned and fall*

short of the glory of God (Romans 3:22b-23). Or that in a sin-damaged world the innocent suffer as a consequence of the misconduct of the guilty. The challenge that Jesus put to the young man was this: please be more careful with your definition of goodness. In absolute terms it is only applicable to God. At best, with reference to human beings created in His image, we can only reflect to some degree the quality of goodness that God displays in its fullness and purity. Our challenge here, though, is to work out what it is that ought to be seen in our character that Paul is describing here and naming as *goodness*.

1. Character and Conduct

Traditionally within the Jewish faith up to Jesus' day what mattered most was doing the right thing with respect to God and other people. This is a high enough standard at the best of times and living by the Ten Commandments is considerably harder than most people ever imagine. Is there anyone who can honestly say that they have never by their words or actions said or done the wrong thing? It is most improbable that anyone could affirm a claim to perfect obedience in right living. However, that is how we ought to seek to live. The Greek philosopher Aristotle is regularly cited as teaching something like this: Make a habit of doing good and you will become good. Speak virtuous words and perform virtuous deeds and in time you will become a virtuous person. It is likely that his view was a little more sophisticated than that, but what is clear is that Jesus in His teaching went considerably further than anyone else in addressing this issue. For Him the most important issue was the character within a person. If a person is genuinely a good person then it is more than likely this will be reflected in that person's conduct; we get surprises sometimes by the behavioural choices a person may make. The reality is that what is inside will ultimately come out. In our garden we have two apple trees. One tree can produce lovely tasty apples, but this year there have been very few that did not have some blemish or other patches that needed to be cut out before the apple could be eaten. On a number of occasions I have put apples on our fruit dish that have had a little bite taken out by insects or some other blemish that seems so small, but within a day or two if no action has been taken some of them have developed significantly greater sections of badness. If no action is taken soon the whole apple will be rotten. It was a good illustration to me of the need for watchfulness over our own lives. If we allow ourselves to indulge in inappropriate attitudes; unwise speech or foolish conduct it is alarming how quickly life can unravel into a most unpleasant situation. Our use of social media likewise has to be so careful or we could create problems for ourselves. What did Jesus say? In Matthew 7:15-20 He stated: *Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves.*¹⁶ *By their fruit you will recognise them. Do people pick grapes from thorn-bushes, or figs from thistles?*¹⁷ *Likewise, every **good tree bears good fruit**, but a bad tree bears bad fruit.*¹⁸ ***A good tree cannot bear bad fruit**, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit.*¹⁹ *Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.*²⁰ *Thus, by their fruit you will recognise them.* He went further in Matthew 12:33-35: ***Make a tree good and its fruit will be good**, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognised by its fruit.*³⁴ *You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.*³⁵ ***A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him**, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him.* The challenge to us all is what are we feeding our inner person in what we watch on-line, on TV or through some other media? If we put rubbish in then it will inevitably impact our attitudes and values; a professional sports star living on junk food would quickly lose the edge on their rivals

in a range of sports where the smallest of margins make the difference between obtaining medals and finishing down the field.

2. Purity of motivation

It is essential to keep our focus on why we do what we do and why we live the way we live. It is not simply something Christians need to do; it is essential in business and many other areas of life. The vision teams for Apple and Coca-cola and some of the other major corporations have done an amazing job in promoting their brands. They are amongst the most recognizable products in the world. They have a clear mission statement which has been followed by their workers and as a result has led to great corporate success. In I Peter 1:13-16 the apostle wrote: *Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at His coming.* ¹⁴ *As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance.* ¹⁵ *But just as He who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do;* ¹⁶ *for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy.'* The idea of holiness is one of separation – what we are separated from and what we are united with, consciously chosen by the individual concerned. We are called to reject that which is evil and also anything else that diminishes our love for the Lord and equally called to embrace values and principles that help us reflect Jesus' character and conduct. It is not something that we will ever find easy to do. We are reminded of this fact in Proverbs 4:23-26: *Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.* ²⁴ *Keep your mouth free of perversity; keep corrupt talk far from your lips.* ²⁵ *Let your eyes look straight ahead; fix your gaze directly before you.* ²⁶ *Give careful thought to the paths for your feet and be steadfast in all your ways.* Each phrase of these verses emphasizes the hard work involved in keeping our focus. It will involve at times standing out against the crowd. Genesis 6:9 says this of Noah in contrast to the vast majority of people of his day: *This is the account of Noah and his family. Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked faithfully with God.* What did God require of King Solomon when he came to throne? I Kings 9:4-5 states: *'As for you, if you walk before Me faithfully with integrity of heart and uprightness, as David your father did, and do all I command and observe My decrees and laws,* ⁵ *I will establish your royal throne over Israel for ever, as I promised David your father when I said, "You shall never fail to have a successor on the throne of Israel."* Sadly Solomon lost his focus and his family lost much of the Kingdom after his death. Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount declared: *Blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God* (Matthew 5:8). The challenge to us all is this: do I do the 'right thing' in whatever context, at home or work or church with the right motivation? That is, with a desire to bring great honour and praise to our heavenly father who delights in the obedient service of His children? We cannot accomplish consistent, credible and effective ministry for the Lord over the longer term if our hearts are not right before Him.

George Washington Carver (1861?-1954) was an extraordinary individual born into an enslaved family in Missouri in the 1860s. He faced all kinds of discrimination in his life but overcame his adversaries. Getting a place in high school was a real problem for an African-American as many white people objected to his presence. He had to change school a number of times to progress his studies. He was inspired by a landlady Mariah Watkins who apparently told thirteen-year-old George: 'You must learn all you can, then go back out into the world and give your learning back to the people.' These words had a lasting impression on his life. Constantly having to overcome racism and injustice he persevered with his schoolwork obtaining a place at a college where he studied Art and Piano. A teacher recognizing his gifts

recommended he moved to another college to study Botany. His success in his studies led him to become the first Black faculty member at Iowa State University. He spent the remainder of his working life helping African-American farmers increase their crop yields and diversify the range of products they were growing for market. Central to his life was his Christian faith which motivated his generosity for assisting other people. He freely gave the details of his crop discoveries to others not requiring financial payment for them. He declined a job offer from Thomas Edison later in life that offered a \$100,000 a year salary together with an impressive new laboratory. Some critics claimed he could have done more for his people if he had accepted this post. His view was simply this: 'If I had all that money I might forget my people'. His epitaph in 1954 contained these words: 'He could have added fame and fortune but cared for neither, he found happiness and honour in being helpful to the world.' [various sources on his life] As a university teacher he was as concerned about the character of his students as their intellectual progress. For him goodness was simply the outworking of a life committed to following Jesus. This extraordinary African-American Christian man was certainly a man who revealed so clearly in his life this flavour of the fruit of the Spirit. The monuments erected in his honour and schools named after him in the USA testify to the respect in which he was held and the good things he accomplished during his extraordinary life. He did not seem himself as special simply a man who had a calling to help other people in particular practical ways.

3. A commitment to doing good

A character that contains a commitment to goodness by being good will naturally want to move on to doing what is good. In his message at the house of Cornelius Peter said this about the life and ministry of Jesus, in Acts 10:36-38: *You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.*³⁷ *You know what has happened throughout the province of Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached –*³⁸ *how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and **how He went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with Him.*** There was an intentionality about the ministry of Jesus to 'do good' wherever He went and in whatever company He was found. It is a challenge to each one of us in our daily lives to follow in His footsteps including in the displaying of this quality of 'doing good' in the various places where we may be found during the week. However, we sometimes are caught up in the tasks we are doing that we forget this calling entrusted to us. It may not necessarily mean we alter what we do, but it may transform how we do things; Toyohiko Kagawa (1888-1960) was a Japanese Christian pacifist, social reformer and labour activist. He had a particular focus on assisting the poorest members of society and living among them. He established schools, hospitals, and churches. He was behind the formation of the Japanese Federation of Labor and the National Anti-War League in 1928. His particular campaigns were Christian evangelism amongst the poorest citizens of Japan; advocating women's suffrage and a call for a peaceful government foreign policy. He was arrested for apologizing to the Republic of China for Japan's occupation of their country and sought to prevent war between his country and the USA. He was an adviser to the transitional government in Japan after World War Two and was twice nominated for the Nobel Peace prize in 1954 and 1955 amongst his many accomplishments [various on-line sources]. No-one could dispute the fact that he went about doing good. His most famous saying was this: 'I read in a book that a man called Christ went about doing good. It is very disconcerting that I

am so easily satisfied with just -going about.’ [http://www.livingwithfaith.org/blog/toyohiko-kagawa-christian-reformer-and-activist]. The doing of good is foundational in the life of a follower of Jesus.

Paul in Ephesians 2:10 stated that: *...we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.* He advocated this as a life-long commitment to this vocation. In Galatians 6:9-10 he wrote: *Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.*¹⁰ *Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.* In the book of James the author, who was the leader of the Christian Church in Jerusalem, gave a clear challenge about the practical nature of our faith. In the second chapter of his letter he emphasizes that genuine faith will show evidence in its practical outworking using the example of Abraham. We are saved by God’s grace alone received through faith alone. However, that faith in practice will never be alone. The recipient of that inward transformation will show evidence of the goodness of God being passed on in a multitude of practical ways to other people. Our calling is to ask the Lord how best we may display this grace in our lives.

4. The generosity of goodness

At the heart of the distinctive meaning of this Greek word is the generosity of goodness. Kindness is an attitude of we ought to display towards other people, but goodness is the practical outworking of kindness in a wide range of social contexts. In Matthew 20:1-16 Jesus told the parable of the workers in the vineyard as one of many illustrations to explain the values of God’s kingdom or rule. In the story the owner of the vineyard went out to hire employees to work in his estate. He took on the first group of day-labourers at 6am and agreed to pay them the standard daily rate of one denarius. In real life that would have been seen as fair pay for a day’s work. Then more workers were hired at 9am, 12 noon and at 3pm and the same wages agreed. Finally at 5pm others were hired to work the last hour of the day. The workers were all called to the office at 6pm to receive their wages. Matthew 20:8-15 records what happened next: *‘When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, “Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.”*⁹ *‘The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius.*¹⁰ *So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius.*¹¹ *When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner.*¹² *“These who were hired last worked only one hour,” they said, “and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.”*¹³ *‘But he answered one of them, “I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius?”*¹⁴ *Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you.*¹⁵ *Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? **Or are you envious because I am generous?**”* The rate of pay to the first workers hired at 6am was entirely fair and reasonable. The rates to the later workers were increasingly generous. No worker was entitled to ask for such apparently preferential treatment, but Jesus was indicating that in His relationship with us God is incredibly generous.

The question that comes to us with respect to the use of our finances, time and abilities is this: am I displaying the generosity of goodness to other people? Paul challenging the less than generous Corinthian Christians about this subject in II Corinthians 9:6-8: *Remember this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.*⁷ *Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.*⁸ *And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.*⁹ *As it is written: ‘They have freely*

scattered their gifts to the poor; their righteousness endures for ever.’¹⁰ Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness.¹¹ **You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.** Barnabas the Cypriot Christian leader in the Early Church modeled this characteristic in his daily life. In Acts 4:36-37 we find the first mention of this man. *Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means ‘son of encouragement’),³⁷ sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles’ feet.* His generous goodness displayed here was typical of his attitude towards people in need throughout his life. In Acts 11: 22-24 there is a short account of a decision taken by the Church in Jerusalem to send a representative to investigate the extraordinary growth of their sister church in Antioch in Syria. The man chosen for this mission was Barnabas. Luke wrote these words:²² *News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch.*²³ *When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.*²⁴ **He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord (Acts 11:22-24).** What description of you and me would sum up the kind of person we are? If your epitaph or mine was being written- in a sentence- what words would best describe you? If you are exceptionally brave you might ask a family member or friend to write such a sentence and share it with you. May God help each of us to display the generosity of goodness in our daily lives, for Jesus’ sake, Amen.