

Followers of the Way

Goodness

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2 Chronicles 6:34-42; Psalm 27:1-14

This is the sixth in our sermon series looking at the fruit of the Spirit. So far, we have covered love, joy, peace, patience, and kindness. Today it is the turn of goodness.

The dictionary definition of goodness is the quality or state of being good; that which is good; moral excellence, virtue, kindness, good nature, generosity; the virtue or essence of anything. At first glance, that definition might sound plausible enough. All right, we may want to check the definition of good at the same time to help us know what the quality or state of being good means. But we get the overall gist of what the dictionary compilers are trying to convey. Until we start to think about it more deeply, that is. Because the definition in fact is circular. To tell us goodness is what is good takes us nowhere at all, since deciding what is good depends on what value system we apply. And, as we know all too well in our post-truth, values-light culture, what one person thinks is good can be very different from the opinion someone else has. Materialism and relativism have taken us down a rabbit hole we find it hard to get out of. The plain fact is, we cannot know what goodness is without an absolute standard by which to judge it, and this absolute standard is the God of the Bible. As Jesus said, “No-one is good – except God alone.” (Mark 10:18). And it follows from this that no-one can really know what goodness is, how to do good, or how to be good, without reference to Him.

The Bible repeatedly affirms that “The LORD is good” (Psalm 34:8, see also 1 Chronicles 16:34, 16, 41, 2 Chronicles 6:13, 7:3, and elsewhere). After God had “[caused] all [His] goodness to pass in front of him” (Exodus 33:19), Moses wrote that this goodness expressed itself in compassion, grace, patience, love, faithfulness, steadfastness, and readiness to forgive (Exodus 34:6-7). It is a goodness reflected in God’s tender-hearted fatherhood (Matthew 7:11), never-failing love (Ezra 3:11), enduring mercy (1 Chronicles 16:34), upright nature (Psalm 25:8), generosity (James 1:5), and in a host of other ways. David sang, “How great is your goodness, which you have stored up for those who fear you, which you bestow in the sight of men on those who take refuge in you.” (Psalm 31:19). The idea of God storing up His goodness ready to bestow on His faithful people at the right time is a beautiful one, because this is what happened at the first Pentecost (Acts 2:1-41). God poured out the Holy Spirit on all flesh that day, fulfilling what the prophet Joel had spoken about several hundred years earlier (Joel 2:28-32), and the LORD has been continuing to pour out the Holy Spirit in this way ever since. When He is accepted into a human heart, the Holy Spirit brings fruit, and Paul tells us this fruit consists of “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” (Galatians 5:22).

The fruit of the Spirit reflect aspects of God's character. When He bestows this fruit on us, He is literally giving of Himself. It is an extraordinary act of generosity on His part, and it is not simply for our personal benefit. The goodness which God makes available to us is there for us to demonstrate it in our dealings with others, and to form part of our witness to a fallen world about the nature and activity of the God we serve. (Note, incidentally, that Galatians 5:22 does not specifically mention mercy and grace. But these are encompassed within goodness. Mercy is God's goodness towards those in distress. Grace is His goodness towards those who deserve only punishment. And other fruit of the Spirit are an overflow of God's goodness, too. Patience is His goodness towards those who continue to sin, kindness is His goodness expressed in readiness to forgive, and compassion is His goodness towards those who are suffering.) When God caused all His goodness to pass in front of Moses, that man witnessed the same attributes of God as the ones the Holy Spirit brings to us as His fruit. This is an overwhelming thought. Moses was unique in his time in seeing all God's goodness pass before him, but we have the blessing of having this goodness lavished on us and set within us as part of the fruit of the Spirit.

The goodness of God should call forth our praise, worship, and thanksgiving. Like King David, we ought to be a people who continually extol the goodness of God. In Psalm 145, David alternates personal and congregational praise in a cascade of worship down the ages and across generations, saying, "Great is the LORD and most worthy of praise; his greatness no-one can fathom. One generation will commend [His] works to another; they will tell of [His] mighty acts. They will speak of the glorious splendour of [His] majesty, and I will meditate on [His] wonderful works. They will tell of the power of [His] awesome works. And I will proclaim [His] great deeds. They will celebrate [His] abundant goodness and joyfully sing of [His] righteousness." (Psalm 145:7). The goodness of God is not something we should keep to ourselves. Instead, we should proclaim it joyfully to each other and to the world at large, to generations that came before us, and to those that will come after. Truly, as the last words of the entire book of Psalms says, "Let everything that has breath praise the LORD. Praise the LORD." (Psalm 150:6).

The goodness of God is not just pie in the sky when you die. It is present in very practical ways during our walk on earth. When Nehemiah completed physical rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem, he then began a spiritual rebuilding, through drawing the people back to firm foundations and setting them on a godly path. As he did so, he recalled how the Israelites of former years "ate to the full and were well-nourished; they revelled in [God's] great goodness" (Nehemiah 9:25), "enjoying [His] great goodness to them in the spacious and fertile land [He] gave them" (Nehemiah 9:35). It is because of the goodness of God that we can look to Him for **compassion**, for "The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made" (Psalm 145:9); for **an answer**, when we cry out to Him: "Answer me, O LORD, out of the goodness of your love; in your great mercy turn to me." (Psalm 69:16); for **evidence of His affection and concern** for us: "Give me a sign of your goodness, that my enemies may see it and be put to shame, for you O LORD, have helped me and comforted me" (Psalm 86:17); for **deliverance**: "But you, O Sovereign LORD, deal well with me for your name's sake; out of the goodness of your love, deliver me" (Psalm 109:21); for **freedom from captivity**: "Set me free from my prison that I may praise your name. Then the righteous will gather about me because of your goodness to me." (Psalm

142:7). It is the goodness of God that caused David to say, “The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food at the proper time. You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing.” (Psalm 145:15-16). This is part of what theologians call Common Grace – the blessings God bestows on believers and unbelievers alike out of His goodness, mercy, and lovingkindness.

But the goodness of God imparted through the Holy Spirit to believers in Christ has a spiritual impact, too, as Paul noted when writing to the Church in Ephesus: “For once you were in darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness, and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them.” (Ephesians 5:8-11). It is because of the goodness of God that we can say, “surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.” (Psalm 23:6, KJV). This Psalm recognises the goodness of God in times of plenty and times of woe – whether we lounge at our ease in green pastures and beside still waters (Psalm 23:2), or are buffeted on all sides as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death (Psalm 23:4). So, whatever our situation, it is right to acknowledge the goodness of God at work in our lives, and resolve to praise and thank Him for it – sometimes despite what we are going through, and despite how dreadful outward circumstances might seem. David managed to praise God even when he was under tremendous pressure, and in real distress. He composed Psalm 34 when, in fear of his life, “he pretended to be insane before [the Philistine ruler] Abimelech, who [then] drove him away, [saying], ‘I will extol the LORD at all times; his praise will always be on my lips.’” (Psalm 34:1). What an example!

All well and good, but what does the goodness of God mean for us today, right here and now in Britain? This is where our Scripture readings come in, and we will start with the passage from 2 Chronicles. This forms part of Solomon’s prayer of dedication following completion of work on building a temple to the LORD in Jerusalem. What a thing this must have been to witness. As people “raised their voices in praise to the LORD and sang: ‘He is good; his love endures for ever.’ Then the temple of the LORD was filled with a cloud, and the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled the temple of God.” (2 Chronicles 5:13-14). After praising God, “Then Solomon stood before the altar of the LORD in front of the whole assembly of Israel and spread out his hands” (2 Chronicles 6:12), and began to pray. In this prayer, Solomon speaks prophetically of what will come to pass in Israel’s future, which is why he uses the word “when” rather than “if.” He foresees how “a man [will wrong] his neighbour” (2 Chronicles 6:22) and so bring judgment on himself, and how Israel will be defeated by enemies (2 Chronicles 6:24), suffer drought (2 Chronicles 6:26), famine, plague, pestilence, and locust swarms (2 Chronicles 6:28) – all because “because they have sinned against [God]” (2 Chronicles 6:24, 6:26). In each case, the king asks God in His goodness to be merciful, and to respond to the prayers of a repentant people. This is where we pick up the narrative.

In the section that follows, Solomon’s prayer encompasses victorious warfare (2 Chronicles 6:34-35), and the very opposite – defeat in war, leading to captivity and exile (2 Chronicles 6:36). Because of the grace and mercy of God, and His saving interventions, we are accustomed in this nation to winning our wars. It is a long time since we suffered

battlefield defeat in the natural realm on a significant scale. But in the spiritual, it is a different story altogether. The plain fact is, with a few shining exceptions and hold-outs here and there, the enemy of our souls has won victory after victory against us, from almost the moment the Second World War ended, right up to the present. We do not have to search far to know why this is: it is because we have sinned against God, in ways too numerous to mention. There is no useful purpose in rehearsing the sad story of our post-war decline and apostasy here. We each know it all too well. And we know, too, what the results of it have been for the bulk of our population: they have been taken captive and brought into exile. Not a physical captivity and exile, but a spiritual one that is every bit as horrible in the here and now, and far grislier as concerns the future. Unless and until something changes, these poor souls are destined to everlasting damnation.

This is the bad news, and it is very bad indeed. But God in His goodness does not want this to be the end of the story. He has provided a way out, and wants to bring us from defeat to victory in Him. He wants this for us as individuals, and He wants it for us as a nation. Solomon did not just pray for God's saving intervention in the personal lives of men, women, and children, but also for the nation of Israel as a collective entity. He pleaded for God "from heaven, [His] dwelling-place, [to] hear their prayer and their pleas, and uphold their cause. And [to] forgive [His] people, who have sinned against [Him]." (2 Chronicles 6:39). Of course, just as in the well-known prayer in 2 Chronicles 7:14, there are provisos, since the goodness of God is infinite and is a given, but our receipt of it is not unconditional. If God is to hear and respond to our prayers, and to bestow His goodness, there are things that must come from our side: **firstly**, that we "have a change of heart" (2 Chronicles 6:37) from the heart condition that led us to "sin against [God]" (2 Chronicles 6:36) and make Him angry; **secondly**, that we should "repent and plead with [Him] ... and say, 'We have sinned, we have done wrong and acted wickedly'" (2 Chronicles 6:37); **thirdly**, that we "turn back to [Him] with all [our] heart and soul" (2 Chronicles 6:38); and **fourthly**, that we should then "pray" (2 Chronicles 6:38), putting our trust and confidence in Him. In the context of his own time and place, Solomon expressed this in terms of praying "towards the land that [God] gave [Israel's] fathers, towards ... [Jerusalem] and towards the temple" (2 Chronicles 6:38). From our own perspective, we might frame it as a call to pray once more to the God of our fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, and to His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, through whose atoning sacrifice God has broken the power of death and sin.

Operating under the Old Covenant dispensation, Solomon offered prayer in the Jerusalem temple, but under the New Covenant, "[we ourselves] are God's temple" (1 Corinthians 3:16), and our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19). If Solomon could ask that God's "eyes be open and [His] ears attentive to the prayers offered in [that] place," (2 Chronicles 6:40), a building constructed by human hands, how much more can we ask the same of what we pray, we being a temple made by God Himself. The presence of Almighty God is with us no less than it was on the day Solomon dedicated the temple, for as Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven is within [us]" (Luke 17:21) and "has come upon [us]" (Matthew 12:28). So, I encourage you to be spiritually ambitious in prayer, not content to ask for small things, or settle for less than God wants to give. Paul says, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be

burdened again by a yoke of slavery.” (Galatians 5:1). We carry the same mandate that Jesus announced for Himself at the start of His earthly ministry, “to preach good news to the poor ... to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, [and] release [for] the oppressed” (Luke 4:18, quoting Isaiah 61:1).

Solomon’s father King David knew plenty about trials and hardship. In Psalm 27, he speaks of “evil men [advancing] to devour my flesh ... enemies and ... foes [attacking] me ... an army [besieging] me ... [and] war [breaking] out against me” (Psalm 27:2-3), of being assailed by “oppressors ... [and] false witnesses [rising] up against me, breathing out violence.” (Psalm 27:11-12). And yet, his triumphant conclusion is, “I am still confident of this: I will see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living. [Therefore], wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD.” (Psalm 27:13-14). David was firmly rooted in his faith, because he knew with unshakeable conviction that God was “the stronghold of [his] life” (Psalm 27:1), and that “in the day of trouble he will keep me safe in his dwelling; he will hide me in the shelter of his tabernacle and set me high upon a rock.” (Psalm 27:5). He understood that God his helper (Psalm 27:9) would receive him, even “though my father and mother [might] forsake me” (Psalm 27:10), and that God would cause his enemies to “stumble and fall” (Psalm 27:2) and would exalt him above the evildoers (Psalm 27:6) who were making his life misery. For David, the goodness of God was not something remote, or only to be experienced in the future. Rather, he boldly asserted, “I will see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living.” (Psalm 27:13). If this was his firm belief, there is no reason why it should not be ours, too.

We know the bad news about our nation all too well. We live daily with the troubles and afflictions of this fallen world. But we need to lift our eyes and our expectations. In these days of crisis and glory, God’s people need to ask Him to bring us into a place of victory, so we may fulfil our Kingdom mandate. The victory we seek is victory in His cause – in that part of the battlefield which is “wherever [He might] send [us]” (2 Chronicles 6:34) – not something we desire for our own glory or advantage. Let us pray for our nation as Solomon did for his: “Now arise, O LORD God ... May your priests, O LORD God, be clothed with salvation, may your saints rejoice in your goodness. O Lord God, do not reject [us]. Remember the great love promised to David your servant.” (2 Chronicles 6:41-42).

Solomon and David both knew the reality of the goodness of God, and desired to see it made manifest in their day. Right now, we see an absence of goodness wherever we turn in this nation. Our institutions have fallen too often into the hands of evil-doers, time-servers, and placemen. Those who wish to destroy us are seemingly given free rein. But we are carriers of the goodness of God, and His goodness will overcome all the evil of the enemy. Let us start spreading some of that goodness about, wherever we go. Our people are lost and adrift, desperately in need of a God they have never heard about, or do not believe in, or scarcely dare trust is real. Paul said, it is “the goodness of God [that] leadeth thee to repentance” (Romans 2:4, KJV), and if the lost souls around us are to come to repentance and saving faith, then we need to tell them about – or, even better, show them – the goodness of our LORD. There is no time like the present to start. Amen.