

“Fruit of the Spirit” series- STUDY 7

GOODNESS

What is good? A minister was leaving a place after having made a visit. The folk said “Goodbye. And be good!” To which he replied “Hey, that’s my job. As a minister it’s hard to be anything else.” That’s the thing isn’t it? As I heard one old Reformed minister put it once (tongue in cheek) “I am paid to be good and the congregation is good for nothing”. That’s the trouble with words isn’t it? They can at times be hard to peg down in meaning. Take the word “good”. If a little girl behaves well, her mother will say “Good, girl”. When things have gone well we will say, “It was a good day.” If we enjoyed the movie we saw the other night, we will say it was a “good movie”. And if we have been inspired in worship then it was a “good service”. In each case we are talking about very different things. But we get the idea that “good” or “goodness” refers to doing things in the right way, things that are pleasing, things that get our approval.

Hebrew

“*TOV*”

pleasant, agreeable,
morally satisfying

OHP

The Hebrew idea. The Hebrew word for good, “*tov*” means “that which is pleasant, joyful, agreeable” with the primary idea being that which “gratifies the senses (delightful, delicious, sweet)”, and extending that, “that which is morally satisfying and right.”

Greek

“*AGATHOS*”

fit, useful, what is right

OHP

The Greek. The Greek word for “good”, and the one Paul uses here in Galatians 5 for this sixth “fruit of the Spirit”, is “*agathos*” which describes that which is “fit, capable, useful, what is right”. It refers to the quality of the thing it describes, something that is “excellent”.

Now the big question is, how do we determine that something is good, excellent, agreeable, right? What constitutes “goodness”? We see that “goodness” is one of the fruit of the Spirit, but what is it? How does “goodness” express itself? This is a debate that has a long history.

GOOD

Ancient Greek style & our style

Pleasure

Removal of ignorance

Greatest benefit for
the greatest good

Lot of goodies

OHP

Ancient Greeks on “good”. The ancient Greeks loved to talk and philosophise. They would debate all sorts of issues at length. One of the key issues they debated was the matter of “What is good?” For Plato it was the central issue. Plato said that the really real things were the eternal ideals that always exist, and in our daily life we strive to find and reach those ideals. The most important thing was to find the supreme good. Later philosophers challenged Plato and said that good is not out there as an ideal. Good is what we determine from our experience. One group saw “good” as the experience of pleasure and the removal of pain. Others said, no, ignorance is the problem. You discover the good life through education and knowledge. Others said good is a very practical thing; you do to others as you want them to do for you. Another ancient concept said good is “the greatest benefit for the greatest number”. And finally there was a group that insisted good has to do with “goodies”. The more you have the better life is. What you notice about these views is that they are all “humanistic”, ie. human centred- “man is the measure of all things”.

Modern view on “good.” Now why am I outlining these ancient views on what constitutes “goodness”? Well, because these views are again the driving force behind so much of what happens in our communities. Australia is not “Christendom”, where all things are done from Christian principles. We are back in the days like ancient Rome and the Greeks. We are a post-modern, multicultural society, where we have all sorts of ideas and religions and cultures all rolled into one place. And the driving forces as to what constitutes “good” are the same as the ancient ideas. How do we determine legislation? By the majority vote “ the greatest benefit for the greatest number” How do we determine what is right, what is good? By what is acceptable to the majority of the people at that time. Why have standards changed on what is seen and heard on television? Because we have changed in our views of what is good and bad. What is the driving force for what is the “good life” in Sydney? The more you have materially the better life will be. How do we decide if something is “good”? If it “feels good”. As the song goes, “How can it be wrong, when it feels so right?” Now, if my pleasure is good, then anything that causes me displeasure is bad. So if my marriage is causing tension and unhappiness I owe it to myself to get out.

A Christian approach to “good”. That thinking around us is constantly influencing us as Christians. Very often we think the same way. Which means we have a big challenge in front of us. So, all of a sudden, this innocuous word “good” or “goodness” takes on a much larger standing in our lives. It is very important to know “What is good?” We get a clue from Jesus in Matthew 19 in the incident with the rich young man. He came up to Jesus and asked, “*Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?*” To which Jesus replied “*Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only One who is good.*” (In Mark he says “*No one is good – except for God alone.*”) Why does Jesus answer the young bloke that way? Because he needs to remove the misconception that we as human beings, on our own without the grace of God, can know what good is and can do good. Paul is very blunt in Romans 3:12 when he quotes the Psalms “*All have turned away, / they have together become worthless, / there is no one who does good, not even one*”.

Goodness defined by God. To understand goodness, what is good, we must come to know God. For, as Psalm 100:5 puts it “*The Lord is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues for all generations.*” The focus here, as with Jesus is that God Himself is good, He is “goodness”. Notice what is being said. It is not the case of us describing God, that He is good. It is the case of God describing what goodness is. God is Himself the ideal, He is absolute perfection and bliss in and of Himself. There is such an absolute perfection in God’s nature that nothing is wanting or defective in Him. Nothing can be added to make Him better. Augustine said that God is “SUMMUM BONUM” – the highest good. God is not only the greatest of all beings. He is the best. He Himself is what we measure everything else by. He is the standard. He is good.

GOOD
God’s way

“No one is good but God”

God is the standard for good

God’s goodness typified by generosity
-“overflowing source of all good”

*Creation is an obedient response
to God’s Word
and it was “very good”*

OHP

What is involved with the goodness of God? In Exodus 33:19 God said to Moses “*I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you and I will proclaim my Name, the Lord, in your presence.*” Then in 34:6 we read “*And he passed in front of Moses proclaiming “ The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin...”* Did you notice the list of perfections here? Compassion, grace, patience, and love. These things together make up God’s

goodness. Louis Berkhof says in his “Systematic Theology”: “*we speak of something as good, when it is ideal in all its parts...and God is in every way all that He as God should be and is.*” Now what is at the heart of this cluster of excellencies? What typifies God’s goodness is generosity. Generosity means to give to others with a big heart- not to give to get- not limited by what others deserve- but to consistently give in abundance. Augustine said God is ‘ULTRO BONUS’- abundant in goodness. The Belgic Confession says that God is “*good and the overflowing source of all good.*” God’s generosity, His goodness, is demonstrated in His creating. He wanted to share of Himself, His life and His love with others. Now, because God is good, whatever He does is good. Think of the beautiful rhythm in the creation story in Genesis. “*God said let there be... and it was so... and it was good.*” The whole creation is an obedient response to the word of God. And in that obedience God saw it all and it was “*very good*”. God took great delight and pleasure in what He had made. We see also God’s generosity in that He has made such an abundance of animals and plants in vast array, spectacular mountain ranges, astonishing galaxies and a universe that goes on and on. God is indeed “*good and the overflowing source of all good.*” So we see that God Himself is “good”. Everything He made is an expression of His “goodness”. God is the standard, and everything(created) is good when it conforms to the will of God.

How do we know how to do “good”? Now that gives us the clue as to how we determine what is good. We do “good” when we, like the creation, are obedient to God. So our understanding is radically different to the culture in which we live. In our communities good is often what the individual feels it is. But we recognise that good is what God says it is. God reserves for Himself to determine what is good. That’s the issue behind the tree in the Garden of Eden that Adam and Eve were not to eat from, the “*tree of good and evil*”. What made the tree different from the vast variety of trees in the garden? Nothing we are aware of. The distinction was made by what God commanded. When Adam and Eve fell they discovered too late that good is knowing and doing God’s will. Evil is not doing God’s will. It is interesting to note that when we have come to know God again through Jesus the first thing we are called back to is doing God’s will. Paul writes in Romans 12: 1&2 “*In view of God’s mercy, offer yourselves a living sacrifices holy and pleasing to God which is your spiritual worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test able approve God’s will- his good, pleasing and perfect will.*”

Conforming to God’s law. Doing the will of God is the key thing when it comes to doing good as far God is concerned. When you do a word study in the Old Testament on the word “*tov*”, “good”, we see that it describes what God has done for Israel, it describes what God will yet do for His people, and how they are to behave in the mean time. In Exodus 18: 34 we read “*Jethro was delighted to hear about all the good(tov) the Lord had done for Israel in rescuing them from the land of the Egyptians.*” In Jeremiah 32:34 we read, as God promises deliverance “*I will bring upon them all the good.*” For the Rabbis the phrase “*the good*” simply meant the Torah, ie the first five books of Moses, the Law. Micah 6:8 says “*He has shown you O man what is good, namely to do justice, love kindness and to walk humbly with your God.*” The Psalmist teaches that what God says is good. “*Your laws are good*” says Psalm 119:39, “*How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth.*”(103). So we see that the sense of goodness being delightful and pleasurable is maintained. God’s law is not just a drudge, it is good in the sense of morally good and excellent and also in the sense of good as a delightful thing. The Heidelberg Catechism summaries well the understanding of what “good”. It asks in Q.91 “*What do we do that is good? – Only that which arise out of true faith, conforms to God’s law and is done for His glory; and not that which is based on what we think is right or on established human tradition.*”

Goodness in our lives. The fruit of “goodness” in our lives is first something that comes by faith. We must have a living relationship with God through the work of Jesus. As Paul writes in Ephesians 2 “*God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ, when we were dead in transgressions. –It is by grace you have been saved... not by works so no one can boast. For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works...*” Because of the death and resurrection of Jesus, we who believe are declared forgiven, we are right with God, in other words, we are legally good. Because of that the Holy Spirit resides in us to stimulate us on to “good works.” But it still requires that we are striving to live a life of obedience to God. The inner battle is still going on. Paul says “*I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do, no the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing.*” There is certainly a struggle, as you and I know. It is so easy to just fall into line with the rest of the culture around us in what it says is good. But it’s not all doom and gloom. The Spirit, who produces the fruit keeps stimulating us and spurring us on to do things by God’s standards. He keeps encouraging us to look at God’s word, to follow God’s law. And I think that for 99% of the cases what God’s law says in very clear. We don’t follow our feelings, we simply do what the bible says. That is the good.

Cling to the good. Often what we need to do is as Paul wrote (Romans 12:9) “*Hate what is evil; cling to what is good... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*” While there are things that are obviously evil, and we are repulsed just by the thought, there are many things that look appealing and we can be easily seduced to go along. What we need to do is “*cling to what is good.*” Clinging to the good is like hanging onto a rope when you’re tired. You just hang on for life. You know what God’s word and law says and you just do it. You cling to it. Perhaps you are bored with your spiritual life, being committed to the church doesn’t seem to do anything for you, your marriage is disappointing. “*Clinging to the good*” is holding on through disappointment, persevering when you are discouraged. You just do God’s will even if it doesn’t seem much fun. Why? Because it is right and good. Because “*...your light shines before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your father in heaven.*” It may seem hard for a time to being doing God’s good. But eventually you will find that God’s ways really are good. Not only in the sense of being morally right, but also in the sense of being delightful, sweet to the mouth, pleasurable. If God is good, and the whole of creation is good as an expression of His goodness, then when we follow God’s ways, we have found the best way, we have found the good life.

DOING GOOD

H *ope in God’s Son Jesus*

O *bey God’s holy word*

L *ive according to God’s will*

Y *ield to God’s Holy Spirit*

DISCUSSION.

Preparation. Read the sermon notes.

Readings. Matthew 19:16-22; Romans 12:1-2; 9-21; Galatians 5:22,23

Questions.

1. What does the word “good” generally mean in our Aussie culture? How do you use the word?
2. What do the Hebrew and Greek words for “good” mean? How does that compare with our use of the word?
3. Describe the ancient Greek philosophies and their views on what was “good”. Do you recognise any of those concepts?
4. Explain the current views in our Australian culture on what constitutes good. How do these views relate to those of the ancient Greeks? How much have these views influenced us in our thinking? How many of the views listed on page 39 do we recognise as our own views as well? Do you sense there are areas we need to change our thinking?
5. Where do we begin to define a Christian approach to what is good? In other words, why does Jesus say to the rich young ruler, “Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good.”
6. What did Augustine mean when he said God is “SUMMUM BONUM”? Explain: “it is not a case of us describing God, that He is good. It is the case of God describing what goodness is.”
7. Why did Augustine say God is “ULTRA BONUM”? Explain the Belgic Confession : “God is good and the overflowing source of all good.” Where and how do we see this expressed?
8. If you want to be good in all you say and do, how do you determine what is good? Explain the link between doing good and God’s law. Explain: “...the law is good in the sense of morally good... and [is also] a delightful thing.”
9. Use the words of Ephesians 2:8-10 to explain the distinction between us as Christians being “legally good” and being stimulated to do “good works”.
10. Why does Paul in Romans 12:9 urge us to “...cling to what is good”? Explain why at times it may be difficult to do, but in fact is a “delight”.
11. Do you honestly feel for yourself, in how you live life that, “when we follow God’s ways we have found the best way”? Why or why not?
12. Explain from the last box on page 42 how the acronym H.O.L.Y. helps us in doing good.