Luke 6:43-45; Psalm 15 *The Fruit of the Spirit: Goodness*

***Nimrod***

In 1908, Ernest Shackleton led the Nimrod Expedition to reach the South Pole in Antarctica. I don’t know if you’ve ever seen a documentary on one of these expeditions, or read a book about them, but these polar adventures were extreme. We’re talking about days on end in temperatures of -20 or -30 or worse. Walking on ice, using dogs to pull sledges, snow constantly whipping in your eyes. I complain about walking the dog when it’s 20 degrees outside. And I only go half a mile. These guys went hundreds of miles in subzero weather.

Anyway, on Shackleton’s 1908 expedition they had to turn back less than a hundred miles from their goal. In his diary, Shackleton tells of the moment their food was almost gone, down to a few scraps of hardtack—a bland, dried biscuit. Shackleton distributed it evenly among the men. Some ate it there and then, licking the crumbs off their fingers like starved dogs. Others stored it in their bags for a time when their hunger became a kind of madness.

That night, Shackleton awoke to a sound. He opened his eyes and, lying still, watched. In the ragged circle of firelight (they burned seal fat) he saw a sight that made his heart sink: his most trusted man opening the sack of the fellow next to him and taking out his food bag.

And then Shackleton saw something that made his heart leap: his most trusted man placing his own hardtack into the other man’s bag. He wasn’t stealing bread. He was sacrificing his own. (Mark Buchanan, *Hidden in Plan Sight*, p. 78)

***A Flexible Word***

We are continuing our series on the Fruit of the Sprit. **Galatians 5:22-23** gives this list of characteristics that will grow in a person’s life if the Spirit is present and allowed to do His work. This is what people look like as they become more like Jesus: love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

And today we are going to look at the sixth fruit on that list: goodness.

“Good” is a pretty flexible word. We use it in a lot of different ways. If I’ve got my hair all in place and my outfit is on point, I might look in the mirror and say: “I look good.” If I’m playing basketball and I hit 5 three pointers in a row, I might run back down the court and say: “Man, I’m good!” If I’m sitting in the Harbor after a community meal and someone comes around with a tray of extra pieces of cake, I might put my hand out and say: “No thanks, I’m good.”

We use the word “good” for lots of different things. Food tastes good, TV shows and movies are good, someone who is competent at his or her job is good (like the good doctor). We can have good times, good feelings, and good friends (and they often go together).

As I looked at the word in the Bible, I found that it could be equally flexible. It’s a word the Bible uses a lot. Most of the time, the word is used to describe God. As the saying goes: “God is good, all the time. And all the time, God is good.” God is the standard of goodness. He is also the source of good in the world. Every good and perfect gift comes from Him (James 1:17).

But when the word is applied to us, as it is in the Fruit of the Spirit passage, it can have a range of meaning. As I looked at resources on goodness this week I found people talking about:

* integrity: good people are people who are the same in one situation as they are in another;
* purity: good people are people who have their hearts in the right place:
* behavior: good people are people who do good things.

As I looked at the word in Scripture it’s that third one—good people are people who do good things—that stuck out to me. Let me give you some examples. **Titus 3:1:**

1Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good.

The apostle Paul had a great deal to say about the importance of Christians being people who do good. As he taught Titus how to pastor a church, he urged him to challenge the people to devote themselves to doing good. Not just being good; but doing good. **Ephesians 2:10**

**10**For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

This passage is all about salvation by grace. The verses just before this insist that it is by grace that we are saved, not by works. Paul is very careful that we know we cannot save ourselves by doing good deeds, but that doesn’t mean that good works are optional. God has prepared all kinds of good for us to do. We don’t get to heaven by doing good, but if we are heaven-bound we are going to do good along the way.

Let’s go next to the book of Acts, and a sermon Peter preached about Jesus. **Acts 10:38:**

**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.

You can describe Jesus’ time on earth as a time of “doing good.” Similarly, **Acts 9:36** describes one of Jesus’ followers:

**36**In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (in Greek her name is Dorcas); she was always doing good and helping the poor.

If you were this woman, how would you prefer to be known? Tabitha sure sounds better than Dorcas, but even better to be known as someone who “was always doing good.” One more passage in this list, **Galatians 6:9:**

**9**Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.

As followers of Jesus, we should never get tired of doing good things. God has good works planned out for us to do. Jesus went around doing good. Jesus’ followers are known for always doing good.

So, as I think about the Fruit of Goodness that the Spirit wants to grow in our lives, I think about being people who do good things in the world. **Goodness is something we do.** We are called to be people of action. People who do the right thing because it is the right thing to do. We are not called to be “do-gooders”, as in busybodies who are always sticking their nose where it doesn’t belong; but “good-doers”, people who act in ways that are generous and helpful and caring and compassionate.

***Good Trees***But there’s another passage we need to consider. A passage that tells us that our actions our connected to our hearts. A passage that says we cannot do good things unless we are good people. I’m thinking of **Luke 6:43-46**:

**43**“No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit.**44**Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thornbushes, or grapes from briers. **45**A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.

This passage is important for us to think about as we study the Fruit of the Spirit because it uses the same metaphor. Jesus is saying that our lives are fruit trees. And the fruit that we bear are the actions that we show: how we treat people, the words that we speak.

Just like you can tell what kind of fruit tree you have by the fruit that it bears—if a tree has apples, then it’s an apple tree; if a tree has figs, then it’s a fig tree—so you can tell what kind of person you have by their actions and their words. If they show evidence of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control; then they are people who are being changed by the Holy Spirit. You could call them Holy Spirit trees. And if those fruits are not being produced, then you’ve got something else.

But notice what Jesus is saying here. He’s saying that we cannot bear good fruit if our hearts are bad. A bad tree does not bear good fruit. An evil man brings evil out of the evil store up in his heart. The mouth speaks what the heart is full of.

That doesn’t mean that a non-Christian can never do good things. Adolf Hitler’s favorite camera pose was with furry animals and little children. Idi Amin used to cry when he heard sad stories. Joseph Stalin was kind to his daughters. Even the wicked know how to *do* good things.

But Jesus is saying that if the heart is wrong, even our best deeds are still evil. If our hearts are wrong, then even our most selfless acts are corrupted by pride and selfishness and impure motives. Bad trees cannot bear good fruit. Not ultimately.

And the transverse is also true: we cannot say that our hearts are good unless we are bearing good fruit. We cannot claim that we are Christians, that we are surrendered to the Holy Spirit, if the fruit of the Spirit is not evident in our lives.

Specifically, as we talk about the fruit of goodness, we cannot say that we are good people unless we are doing good things. Our good deeds become one of the litmus tests of whether we are truly followers of Christ. As James says, faith without works is dead (James 3:14-26).

So I want to go back to my definition from earlier and add to it. I said that “Goodness is something we do.” Now I want to add to it that it must **“grow out of what we are.”** We cannot do truly good things unless we are first good people. A bad tree will not produce good fruit. We must first be good trees.

Now, hopefully, you sense a problem here. Because, Biblically speaking, none of us are good. We might help the occasional cat down from a tree, or make random donations to food banks, but those good deeds do not in and of themselves make us good.

Only God is truly good. Apart from God, no one does good (Rom. 3:12). Apart from God, nothing good lives in us (Rom. 7:18). Trying to do good without first being good is doomed to futility.

And so, as we’ve been saying throughout this study of the Fruit of the Spirit, this is not something we can produce on our own. It’s a fruit “*of the Spirit*.” We need Him to do His work in us. We can only grow the Fruit of Goodness as the Spirit makes it grow and ripen in our lives.

But, just like the farmer who depends on God to make his seeds sprout and grow and produce a harvest, there are things we can do to cultivate the crop. While we cannot make goodness grow in our lives, we can tend the soil of our hearts and pull the weeds in our lives that will give goodness a chance to thrive.

***Psalm 15***With that in mind, I’d like us to turn to **Psalm 15.** Psalm 15 is not a passage that uses the words “good” or “goodness,” but I believe it gives a pretty good description of what a good person looks like. It’s not a very long Psalm, so allow me to read it:

**1**Lord, who may dwell in your sacred tent?  
    Who may live on your holy mountain?

**2**The one whose walk is blameless,  
    who does what is righteous,  
    who speaks the truth from their heart;  
**3**whose tongue utters no slander,  
    who does no wrong to a neighbor,  
    and casts no slur on others;  
**4**who despises a vile person  
    but honors those who fear the Lord;  
who keeps an oath even when it hurts,  
    and does not change their mind;  
**5**who lends money to the poor without interest;  
    who does not accept a bribe against the innocent.

Whoever does these things  
    will never be shaken.

Some scholars believe this Psalm may have been used by pilgrims as they approached the tabernacle or temple. **The first verse:** “Lord, who may dwell in your sacred tent?” implies that the Psalm is about the kind of preparations that should be made before coming to worship.

Others suggest that this is more of a “wisdom Psalm” talking about the ethics that should characterize the righteous person.

Either way, what we end up with is a list of behaviors that describe the kind of person that God approves of. The kind of person who would be qualified to live on God’s holy mountain. In the next four verses then, I see at least 6 things that will describe a good person.

So, if we want to **cultivate goodness,** let me suggest these six things:

First, **Live with Integrity.** Be the same person when no one is watching as you are when people are around. **Verse 2:**

**2**The one whose walk is blameless,  
    who does what is righteous,

The word “blameless” does not mean perfect, but rather a heart attitude that desires to please God. It’s the kind of life that an observer would have a hard time finding fault with. It’s a consistent life. A life that is free from double standards and hypocrisy.

Christopher Wright says:

What quality do we see in someone when we say—“He is a really good man,” or “she is a really good woman”? I think one key thing would be integrity—an absence of any kind of guile or deception. Truly good people are WYSIWYG (What You See Is What You Get). They are in reality all they appear to be. Their words and behavior on the outside matches what is going on inside. There is no sham or pretense. When they do good, it is not just some kind of playacting to get a good name, or a good photo-op, or a good sound bite. Good people do what they do simply because it is the right thing to do. (*Cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit*, p. 98)

So the good person is a person who is good all the time, not just when people are watching.

Second, **Speak Honestly**. Control your tongue. The last line of **verse 2** and the first line of verse 3:

    who speaks the truth from their heart;  
**3**whose tongue utters no slander,

As we saw in Luke 6, what comes out of our mouths reveals a lot about what’s going on in our hearts. A person who is cultivating the fruit of goodness will tame his or her tongue.

That means telling the truth. Not shading the truth, not spinning things so that we always come out looking good, not withholding information that might make us look bad. Goodness comes with a level of transparency. It doesn’t feel the need prevaricate.

More than just truth-telling, though, the good person is careful about other sins of the tongue. Gossip, insults, grumbling, profanity. All of these are things that the good person guards against. One translation of the first line of verse 3 says: “He who does not trip over his tongue.” I like that phrase. A person who is cultivating goodness is careful not to trip over his tongue. He doesn’t let his tongue get him into trouble.

Third, **Care for your Neighbor**. Look out for others. The last two lines **of verse 3:**

who does no wrong to a neighbor,  
    and casts no slur on others;

The good person does not purposely hurt others, let alone a neighbor or a close friend. Neither does a good person participate in tearing down others. Casting a slur means to spread an evil word about someone, or even to listen while someone else speaks an evil word against a neighbor.

More than just refraining from wrong, I think goodness means helping your neighbor. It’s following the example of the Good Samaritan in Jesus’ famous parable; or imitating the man who shared his bread in the Shackleton story I told at the beginning of the sermon. The good works that God has prepared for us to do include acts of generosity and kindness. It means going out of your way to serve someone else, sacrificing your time, treasure, and talent to make someone else’s situation a little better.

Fourth, **Know Right from Wrong**. Discern between good and evil. **Verse 4:**

**4**who despises a vile person  
    but honors those who fear the Lord;

The Bible uses strong language here. We teach our kids not to use a word like “hate.” We’re not supposed to hate anyone. And the word “despise” seems even worse. Does God really want us to despise people?

Well, the Psalm uses an equally strong term to describe the person we should despise. A “vile” person isn’t just someone who doesn’t know God, but someone who is so hardened in his or her sin that there would appear to be no hope of repentance or change.

I don’t think the Bible is saying that we should give up hope that these people will someday be saved, but we should show discernment in our association with them. As the old saying goes: “Bad company corrupts good character.” We should despise them in the sense that we keep our distance from their actions, that we are guarded in the influence we allow them to have in our lives.

In other words, this is saying that a good person is wise in his or her choice of friends. They are people smart in their ability to recognize those who fear the Lord, and those who thumb their nose at Him.

Fifth, **Keep your Promises**. Be a person others can depend on. The second half of **verse 4:**

who keeps an oath even when it hurts,  
    and does not change their mind;

A good person is a person of his or her word. When you make a promise, when say you will do something, do it. Follow through. Even if it’s hard. Christopher Wright again:

[This] seems to be another strong element of biblical goodness—being committed to doing the right thing even when it costs or hurts. “Good” people are those who resist the temptation to take the easy way out of a tough situation. Even when it is difficult or dangerous to do the right thing, they do it anyway. They persevere in doing what they know to be right, no matter what the consequences. For that reason good people are usually also courageous, and sometimes they do indeed pay a heavy price for their integrity. (101)

Then, sixth, **Handle Money Well.** How we handle money says much about our goodness. **Verse 5:**

**5**who lends money to the poor without interest;  
    who does not accept a bribe against the innocent.

This isn’t a knock on bankers, rather it’s a warning against economic injustice. The word translated as “interest” here is better translated as “usury.” That’s the practice of the wealthy charging extremely high interest on loans made to those who had fallen on hard times. It was not unusual in the Ancient Near East for interest rates of 50 percent to be used. This, of course, would ensure that the rich would get richer while those who were poor stayed poor.

Likewise, the line about bribes against the innocent is a recognition that those who had money had an easier time finding favor in the courts. Judges and officials could be bribed to see things a certain way, which ensured that the rich found things going their way more often than not—and again, the poor suffered.

A good person will use his or her money well. A good person will take care not to participate in economic systems that discriminate against those who have less. A good person will do their part for economic fairness.

These are six ways, then, to cultivate goodness. Integrity, honesty, care, discernment, dependability and fairness. This is the kind of person who can dwell in the Lord’s sanctuary. Or, as the final verse of **the Psalm says:**

Whoever does these things  
     will never be shaken.

This is how to be good. This is how to plant your feet on a firm foundation.

***Heart Transplant***Finally, I want to tell you about something new we’ve started doing as a church staff. We’ve started using a verse-a-day app on our phones. When we take our morning break, the first thing we do is take 5 minutes to talk about the verse. Just a little something to help us follow the Lord together.

And on Thursday, our verse came from **Psalm 34:**

**15**The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous,  
    and his ears are attentive to their cry;  
**17**The righteous cry out, and the Lord hears them;  
    he delivers them from all their troubles.

Again, the verse doesn’t use the word good, but I thought it sounded a lot like the beginning of Psalm 15. Who gets to live on God’s holy hill? Who gets their cries listened to by the Lord? The righteous person. The good person.

And as we talked about Thursday, we talked about how hard it is to be this righteous person on our own. We recognized that if it were up to us, none of us would fit the description.

Then Lori said something about needing a heart transplant. She said that if we are going to be considered righteous, we need God to change us first. The verses she was thinking of come from **Ezekiel:**

**26**I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. **27**And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. (Ezekiel 36:26-27)

Here’s the key. Just like the fruit tree from Luke 6. A bad tree can’t bear good fruit. A bad heart cannot do good. So we need God to give us a new heart. We need him to graft something new onto the tree.

It’s then, and only then, that we can cultivate goodness in our lives.