

Sermon - 2-7-21 Fruit of the Spirit - Goodness
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Surely the Presence of the Lord
Think About His Love

Today, we are continuing our study of the fruit of the Spirit. Last week, we looked at the fruit of kindness — the Spirit given ability to feel the hurts and needs of others and reach out with a helping hand. My guess is that that is probably the image most people have of Jesus — the gentle healer, reaching out to minister to those in need. Jesus, healing the leper, restoring sight to the blind, and asking those who were about to condemn a woman caught in adultery whether they were without sin. It is why we so often **picture Jesus** sitting with the little children or cuddling a lamb. Those images are so lovely, peaceful, comforting, kind. I love them.

Certainly, that is one side of Jesus. But it is only one side of Jesus. Mark paints a very different picture of Jesus. Let me read Mark 11:15-18: **“On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple courts and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. And as he taught them, he said, “Is it not written: ‘My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations’? But you have made it ‘a den of robbers.’” The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching.**

The picture Mark paints is not that of a gentle, kind Jesus. His Jesus is angry. In his story, Jesus takes up a whip and drives the money changers and sellers of merchandise from the outer court of the temple. It is hard to imagine the gentle shepherd, we so love, **angrily driving off the merchants** and their bodyguards, taking a whip to those who hesitate. I can you hear him screaming, “Is it not written, my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations? But you have made it a den of robbers.” Obviously, Jesus was no wimp. There is no denying that he had a temper.

Jesus had good reason to be angry. The **outer court** was the one place where the Gentiles (those who were not Jews) could come and pray before God's throne. It was meant to be a place of prayer, but in the name of raising funds, the temple officials turned it into a noisy marketplace. Worse, they raised their funds by exploiting God's people. Every Jew was required to journey to the temple once per year and pay a temple tax of 1/2 shekel. However, the temple officials refused to accept the tax unless it was paid in temple coins. Which was a challenge for the people, because most commerce was done in Roman and Greek coins. Temple coins were hard to come by. Which enabled the priests to set up money changing booths in the outer courtyard where Greek and Roman coins could be exchanged for temple coins. For a handling fee of 25%.

If this was not bad enough, there were also booths that sold sacrificial animals. Of course, worshippers could bring their own animals. But in order for those animals to be accepted, the priests had to determine that they were without blemish. Unsurprisingly, the priests invariably found blemishes on the animals that people brought to them. Word soon got out that if you wanted your sacrifice to be acceptable to the priests, it had best be purchased from the temple. What's more, since blemish free animals were rare, the priests were able to justify selling them at a premium. Indeed, they often went for 20 times the going rate of similar animals purchased outside the temple court.

This was quite a moneymaker for the temple priests and their cronies. But Jesus didn't care how lucrative it was. He was offended that his Father's house of worship had been transformed into what amounted to a den of thieves. Not that what the priests were doing was secret. Everyone knew what was going on. But few were willing to risk standing up to the corrupt temple priests. They also knew it was wrong but what could they do about it? They knew that there would be a price to pay for challenging the priests. Jesus did not care. What they were doing was wrong, and Jesus chose to stand for what was right, regardless of the consequences. And there were consequences. Mark tells us that the priests began to look for a way to get rid of him.

What Jesus exhibited in the temple that day was the fruit of goodness. This fruit is not the goodness we praise a child for, when we say, "My but you are a good little boy or girl." This goodness is a determination to do what is right regardless of the cost. It is strength of character. It is integrity. It is holiness.

Goodness is a matter of being true to who God created us to be. Goodness cannot be faked. Not that people don't try to fake being good. Matthew likened them to

wolves in sheep's clothing, pretending to be good when in reality they were not. Jesus pointed out that you cannot pick grapes from thorn bushes or figs from thistles. Goodness is a fruit that only grows in those who are open to the Holy Spirit. Others may fake it for a time, but when they are alone or when the pressure grows, their true selves shine through. Goodness is a matter of integrity, of allowing the Spirit to transform us into the holy people God created us to be.

Which means that it does no good to pretend to be good. Goodness is a gift of the Spirit that grows as we pray, study scripture, serve, and most importantly seek to grow under the direction of the Spirit. True goodness is a matter of integrity, of being who we are meant to be.

I am reminded of a story Mark Twain told of his boyhood days. One day, he came upon a cart filled with watermelons. There was no one around to notice and since he was quite fond of watermelons, he borrowed one. Mark Twain knew it was wrong to steal. He tried to resist the temptation, but in the end, he could not resist taking a ripe looking watermelon from the cart and running into a nearby alley. Once out of sight, he broke the watermelon open and sank his teeth into the bright, red melon. However, a strange feeling quickly came over him. Without hesitation, he returned the melon to the cart from which he had taken it. And then took a ripe one.

Say what you will about Mark Twain, he acted with integrity. He did not claim to be a Christian nor did he pretend to be one. As Jesus said, **“I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth.” — Rev. 3:15-16.**

Too many people seem to think that the way to make themselves acceptable to God is act like a Christian. They think that if they are good enough, God will love and accept them. You may recall the Seinfeld episode where Seinfeld bought his dad a Cadillac. On learning of that, his friend commented, “Boy you are going to earn some big points with the guy upstairs.”

Seinfeld's friend was wrong. That is not how it works. God's love is not an awards program for those who have earned enough points. Indeed, those who pretend to be good in order to earn God's favor are like wolves in sheep's clothing, pretending to be good, but deep down in their heart of hearts they know they are not. They have it backwards. God does not love and accept us because we are good. God loves us and offers to accept us, and when we accept that offer, God

sends the Spirit to equip us to be good. God does not accept us because we are good. God helps us to be good after we accept him. We only really become good after we become filled with God's Spirit.

It is like the old illustration of a sponge. **Sponges come in a wide variety of colors.** There are blue sponges and red sponges, even pink and yellow sponges. If the color of the sponge is dark enough, it can be hard to tell what has been absorbed into the sponge. From the outside, you cannot tell whether a sponge is filled with clear water or red Kool-aid. Ahh, but if you apply a bit of pressure you will soon learn what is inside. It is the same with character. Anyone can pretend to be good for a time. But no one can produce lasting goodness by themselves. When pressure is applied, our true character comes out.

The pressure will come. Trust me. If you attempt to live a good life, pressure will come. The world does its best to pressure us to accommodate to its ways. And goodness is not the way of this world. So, the world does what it can to counter it. Think about Jesus. What happened when he tried to stand up for what was right by confronting the priests in the temple? That is right. They began to look for ways to kill him.

Nor will the world take kindly to us if we follow the Spirit and stand up for what is true and right. Often, the ways of God stand in opposition to the ways of the world. God's truth stands in judgment over the world and its ways. And people don't react well to being judged. They grow angry and judgmental themselves. Perhaps that is why Jesus reminded his followers, **"Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."** — **Matthew 5:11-12.**

True, the world may turn on us if we stand up for what is right. However, we need to be careful not to assume that every time someone challenges us, we are victims of the world's persecution. This is a jump that too many Christians make. How many times have you seen someone act like a jerk, judging others and acting as if we were holier than them? Naturally, others react negatively to being judged. Sometimes they even strike back. And sometimes they should. If anyone, especially those of us who claim to love with the love of Christ, are being jerks, we should be judged. It happens. I have seen too many Christians act as judgmental jerks, justifying their behavior as goodness, then misreading the righteous

condemnation of others as further proof that they were in the right. Sometimes we are judged by the world because we have stood up for an unpopular truth. But just as often, we are judged because we were being jerks.

I recall a time, over thirty years ago, when I took my young sons to Dairy Queen for a treat. While we were waiting for our order, a woman, who was on the heavy side, walked by. Unfortunately, as she passed, one of my boys commented in a loud voice, “Boy Dad, that lady sure has a big butt. That is the biggest butt I have ever seen.” My son was not wrong. He was speaking the truth and speaking it fearlessly. He spoke truth, but it was not spoken in love. I am sure that the woman was already aware that she was overweight and my son’s judgmental words probably hurt her feelings.

I think that is why Paul lists the spiritual fruits of goodness and kindness side by side. Certainly, goodness requires that we speak truth and do it without fear, but goodness is only goodness if it is tempered with kindness. Thus Paul writes, **“Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him, the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.” — Eph. 4:14-16**

When we open ourselves up to God’s Spirit, the Spirit helps us to escape the temptation to be blown back and forth by the latest trends of a society. Instead, the Spirit directs us to speak the truth. We are to speak the truth, but we are told to speak that truth in love so that it can build up the body to do the work of Christ. Goodness is never an excuse to be a jerk. It must always be tempered by love. Which means that if truth is not motivated by love, it is probably not of the Spirit.

A couple of months back, I read an article cautioning people to be aware of how they use and store bleach and other sanitizing solutions, especially if they have children or pets. There have been hundreds of instances of accidental poisonings involving both children and pets. I am not saying that bleach is a bad thing. Bleach is a good thing. It kills viruses. But we need to be careful about how we use and store it, because bleach is poisonous. It can make you sick. It can even kill you. **Chlorine**, by itself, is a very dangerous chemical.

Of course, there are other dangerous chemicals out there. For example, **sodium** is also dangerous. Sodium is a highly reactive metal that does not occur in nature. Indeed, when it is isolated, it is so reactive that it has to be handled carefully lest it explode.

Which makes it surprising to learn that when you combine chlorine with sodium you get, NaCl, common table salt. Unlike chlorine and sodium, salt can be good for us. It preserves food. It brings out flavor. Salt is even used medically. Sodium is explosive. Chlorine is poisonous. But when you combine them, you get sodium chloride, a very useful compound, that some argue is essential to life.

Goodness and kindness are a lot like sodium and chloride. They do not stand well alone. Kindness, by itself, can be wimpy. It too often gives in, in the name of peace. It cuts corners to avoid conflict. It white-washes the truth. It settles for giving people what they want instead of what they need.

In much the same way, goodness, by itself, can be harsh and even offensive. Separated from kindness, it offends people and drives them away. It poisons relationships. Yet, when we combine kindness and goodness together, we become Christlike in our behavior. We become what Jesus called the salt of the earth. We become people who speak truth in love. I suppose you could say that goodness is just that, speaking and doing truth in love.

Of course, this is not how the world depicts goodness. Goodness is not the good child who kisses up to their parents and teachers in order to get along. Nor is goodness the angry prophet who proclaims to everyone that they are headed to hell. Goodness always combines truth with love.

Certainly, there are times when love requires, that like the money changers in the temple, we stand up for the truth, calling evil evil. But far more often, we are called to sow truth gently and water it with love. So, how do we know what goodness calls us to do? How do we know what kindness requires? The answer, of course, is to listen to the still small voice of the Spirit who both equips us and guides us as we seek to live lives of both kindness and goodness.

Goodness. It is the fruit of the Spirit that we will add to the verse we are memorizing. **“The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, and goodness.”** Memorize that and meditate on it as you go through your week, asking the Holy Spirit to equip and guide you as you seek to be good even as your Heavenly Father is good.

