

## Goodness

7 of 10 in *Marks of a Flourishing Life*

August 13, 2023

Gal. 5:22-23, etc.

Oh my goodness. Do you ever use that phrase? As in:

Donald Trump could become the US president for a second time? Oh my goodness!

A package of steaks costs how much at the grocery store? Oh my goodness!

It was so hot in Phoenix this summer that some people got second degree burns on their feet just from walking on the sidewalk. Oh my goodness!

Back in the day, Jan and I would use the phrase quite a bit with our kids:

Oh my goodness, which one of you tracked all this mud into the house?

Oh my goodness, why don't you take out the garbage when it's full instead of just cramming more in there!

Oh my goodness, you have a test tomorrow, and you're just starting to study now?

A strange phrase, isn't it? What my "goodness" has to do with any of the things I just mentioned, I have no idea. Still, most of us mindlessly toss that phrase around all the time, which is perhaps why author Mark Buchanan writes that the word, "Goodness has grown dull, so bland, so shapeless."

However, the Bible's use of the word "goodness" is far from bland or shapeless. In fact, it's quite rich and meaningful. Biblical goodness is a virtue full of consequence for our lives as followers of Jesus. It's a virtue full of consequence for the way we relate to God and to other people.

So for the sake of your growth in goodness and mine, let's talk about it today. And all God's people said: "Oh my goodness!"

This message is a continuation of our series called *Marks of a Flourishing Life*. Over the past several weeks, we've been talking about the highly relational fruit of the Holy Spirit, which the apostle Paul lists in chapter 5 of his letter to the Galatians:

But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things! <sup>1</sup>

If you are a follower of Jesus, God, by his Holy Spirit, wants to grow within you these capacities. The fruit of the Spirit is really all about reflecting the character of Jesus in our relationships, and when the church does that, others get drawn to Jesus.

With that in mind, I'd like to use the rest of the message time to talk about biblical goodness. We're going to consider goodness similarly to the way we considered kindness last week. We're going to look at **what biblical goodness means** and **the means to grow in it**.

Then, after the teaching time, we'll celebrate the Lord's Supper together. First let's consider:

### **1. The meaning of biblical goodness.**

Now, the criteria for what makes one thing good is usually not the same criteria for what makes another thing good.

For example, what makes a good sailboat is something quite different from what makes a good pizza. What makes a good shoe is something quite different from what makes a good joke.

So if what makes one thing good is quite often different from what makes another thing good, how can we even begin to define what goodness means?

Well, we can when we understand that **goodness is about fulfillment of purpose**.

When something functions as it was made to, and meant to; when something does what it's supposed to do, then it's a *good* thing—whether it's a sailboat, a pizza, a shoe, or a joke.

A good knife, for example, is a knife that cuts well. Why? Because the primary purpose of a knife is to cut. It doesn't matter how beautiful the handle, or how shiny the blade. If a knife can't cut, it's not a good knife. Unless it's a butter knife, in which case, if it spreads butter well, it's good, because that's the purpose for which it's been made. So goodness is about fulfillment of purpose.

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<sup>1</sup> Galatians 5:22-23 (NLT)

In the Bible, goodness refers to something that fulfills its purpose, and especially, to people who fulfill the purposes for which they exist. Let's consider some examples from scripture.

The first place in the Bible where something is called good is where? Genesis chapter 1.<sup>2</sup>

As God spoke each phase of creation into existence, he saw that it was good. And when people were made in God's image, creation's status was upgraded to "very good." In other words, the planet and its people at that time were fulfilling the purposes for which God had created them. That's goodness.

Jump ahead to the end of Genesis, chapter 50, and Joseph says this of his brothers' evil plot against his life:

"You intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good. He brought me to this position so I could save the lives of many people."<sup>3</sup>

The hardships Joseph endured are described as *good*— not because they were pleasant— but because they led to the fulfillment of God's redemptive purposes, the saving of many lives from a famine that had swept the land. So here again we see that in the Bible, goodness is about fulfillment of purpose.

Indeed, the biblical concept of goodness is rooted in God himself— in his person and his purposes for the world. What makes someone a good person or not? Does your judgment, or mine? What's the standard? We may talk about whether or not people are good in terms of human standards and expectations, but the Bible makes it clear that **God alone is the source of all goodness.**

We see this in Luke's gospel, where a wealthy young leader approached Jesus with a question. The text says:

A certain ruler approached him and said, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

"Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good—except God alone."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See Genesis 1:1-31

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 50:20 (NLT)

<sup>4</sup> Luke 18:18-19 (NIV)

Of course, Jesus is God who came in the flesh—the ultimate embodiment of God’s goodness. But in saying, “No one is good—except God alone,” Jesus was letting this rich ruler know that God is the one source and standard of all goodness.

At the same time, Jesus was saying that we all fall utterly short of God’s standard. “No one is good—except God alone.” Goodness is not characteristic of the sinful human condition. Why? Because in our fallenness, we fail to fulfill the purposes for which God has created us. As the Apostle Paul puts it in Romans:

For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature.<sup>5</sup>

But, Paul goes on to say a few verses later:

What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!<sup>6</sup>

The witness of the Bible is that sin makes us incapable of true and lasting goodness, because sin separates from God, who alone is perfect goodness, the one source of all goodness.

But thanks be to God that through the saving power of Jesus, our relationship with God can be restored, and through his Spirit’s work in our lives, we can now grow in goodness. We can learn to live, more and more, as God intends us to live—in accordance with the purposes for which he has created and redeemed us.

It happened for the early Christians in Rome. Paul would go on to say of them:

“I am fully convinced, my dear brothers and sisters, that you are full of goodness.”<sup>7</sup>

Because God alone is the source of all goodness, true goodness can only flow out of a life yielded to God through Jesus Christ. That’s why the Bible says in John’s third letter that:

Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil but what is good. Anyone who does what is good is from God. Anyone who does what is evil has not seen God.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Romans 7:18a (NIV)

<sup>6</sup> Romans 7:24-25 (NIV)

<sup>7</sup> Romans 15:14a (NLT)

<sup>8</sup> 3 John 11 (NIV)

And because God is the source of all goodness, our views about the purpose of life (and therefore what counts for goodness) must come from God and God alone. Only God our Creator can define what true purpose, and therefore true goodness, is for the world as well as for you and me. This is what Paul has in mind when he writes in Romans 12:2:

Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect. <sup>9</sup>

Let's put it this way: Goodness has to do with having *God's view* of what life is all about—as opposed to letting the culture at large dictate the way you see things. Because how can you live a life of goodness—a life that fulfills God's purposes—if you don't know what God's purposes are?

The opposite of goodness is to have a corrupted view of life, where we change the definition of life and how it should be lived, calling good evil, and evil good. We see such corruption in the Old Testament book of Judges, where it says that all the people did what seemed right in their own eyes. <sup>10</sup>

We see such corruption in Romans chapter 1 where it says of fallen humanity:

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools... <sup>11</sup>

It's important to note that in the Bible, **there is a vital link between knowing good and doing good**. In other words, in order to be able to live a life of goodness—a life that fulfills the purposes God has for us—we need to have *God's view* of what life is all about. We need to have a good understanding of God's purposes, his will for this world, and for us. For this reason, in his prayers for the Colossian Christians, Paul said:

We ask God to give you complete knowledge of his will and to give you spiritual wisdom and understanding. Then the way you live will always honor and please the Lord, and your lives will produce every kind of good fruit. All the while, you will grow as you learn to know God better and better. <sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Romans 12:2 (NLT)

<sup>10</sup> See Judges 21:25

<sup>11</sup> Romans 1:21-22 (NIV)

<sup>12</sup> Colossians 1:9b-10 (NLT)

Do you see here the link between knowing good and doing good— between understanding God’s purposes and will, and then out of that living a life of goodness— a life that fulfills the purposes God has made and redeemed us for?

There’s another thing we need to note when it comes to doing good. It’s that at the end of the day, **biblical goodness results in concrete, self-giving actions that benefit others.**

In this way, goodness squarely overlaps with *kindness*, which we looked at last Sunday. Good deeds do not save us, of course. Faith in Jesus saves us. But good deeds are a manifestation of the fact that God— who alone is good— is alive in us by his Spirit.

Concrete, self-giving actions that benefit others are what the Apostle Paul has in mind when he tells the Galatians:

Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers. <sup>13</sup>

So we are called to do good to all people, especially to those in our church family. Concrete, self-giving actions that benefit others are what the Apostle Peter had in mind when he wrote:

Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. <sup>14</sup>

Here we see that our good deeds not only serve the practical needs of others, but also point others beyond us, to the one who is the true source of our goodness—God. Our capacity to reflect God’s goodness draws others to God, as Jesus makes clear when he says:

In the same way let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father. <sup>15</sup>

So we’ve talked about the *meaning* of biblical goodness. Now let’s talk about:

## **2. The means to grow in goodness.**

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<sup>13</sup> Galatians 6:9-10 (NIV)

<sup>14</sup> 1 Peter 2:12 (NIV)

<sup>15</sup> Matthew 5:16 (NLT)

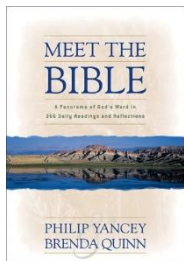
I'd like to consider three means in particular.

The first is to **get into scripture on your own and with others**. We've seen that goodness is about fulfillment of purpose—God's purpose— and therefore it requires having God's view of what life is all about. The question then becomes, how do I get God's view of what life's all about?

You get it in the Bible. 2 Timothy chapter 3 says that:

All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right. God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work.<sup>16</sup>

If you want to know what life is all about, what this world was made for, shouldn't you go to the one who made life, and gave it its purpose? He reveals the answers, in large part, through the Bible. So get to know it, both on your own, and with others.



For getting into the Bible on your own, a resource we've often recommended it [Meet the Bible](#), edited by Philip Yancey and Brenda Quinn. It's available from Amazon in paperback and there's also a Kindle version.

In 365 short daily readings, *Meet the Bible* gives you a panorama of the whole Bible, along with helpful, well-written reflections from the authors each day.

Of course, there are many other good resources for getting into God's word. Find something that works for you, and use it. If you get into the habit of reading a bit of scripture every day, you'll be surprised how much you can learn and grow in your understanding of God's purposes over the course of a month or six months, or a year, and as you do, God will be equipping you not only to understand, but also to live out the purposes he has for you, thereby enabling you to grow in goodness.

Also, to get to know the Bible, you'll definitely want to avail yourself of The Bible Project's resources ([www.thebibleproject.com](http://www.thebibleproject.com)). The Bible Project is just the best. The URL to their home page is on the screen, and they also have an app you can download to take advantage of the incredible content they have— much of which consists of wonderful, short animated videos that explain the Bible. There are Bible reading plans you can follow, and now they have a feature called "classroom" where they offer free online courses that will

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<sup>16</sup> 2 Timothy 3:16-17 (NLT)

help you become well-familiar with the grand narrative, history, context, themes and characters of the Bible.

Of course, when it comes to getting into scripture, you can't live on an island. You need to get into the Bible not just on your own, but also with others. We need to study God's word both individually and in community. Why?

Because others can help you grow in understanding and applying scripture in ways you wouldn't on your own. They will see things that you don't see, for example, and show you perspectives you had never thought of. On the other side of the coin, they can learn from your insights as well.

So join a small group and get into God's word with others. Or participate in a semester-based Bible elective at Cornerstone— at least one Bible elective is offered every fall, winter and spring semester, and sometimes in the summer as well.

And of course, make it a point to attend worship service every Sunday. No matter which one of us is up here doing the sermon, we're all deeply committed to bringing solid, biblical teaching to you guys week in and week out. It's a big part of what we've been called to do, and we take it seriously.

As such, we hope and pray that as you commit to being here each Sunday, you'll find that God is shaping you in your knowledge of his word, in your understanding of his purposes, and in the process, equipping you for every good work.

Indeed, the Bible says in Ephesians 2:10:

For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.<sup>17</sup>

If you're a follower of Jesus, God has given you new life in Christ not only so that you'll be saved from sin but for the purpose of doing good works that God has prepared in advance for you to do.

Remember, biblical goodness is about fulfillment of purpose—God's purposes for you. So discovering and living the callings God has for you—the good works he has prepared for you to do—is another vital aspect of growing in goodness.

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<sup>17</sup> Ephesians 2:10 (NIV)



I love what author Frederick Buechner says about this:

The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.

- Frederick Buechner

Did you know that Cornerstone has a stream of ministries dedicated to helping people explore the callings Jesus has for them?

We offer something called the Strengths Workshop a few times a year, where you can discover your top strengths and begin to explore your callings. So you can watch for that.

As well we offer a focused, one-on-one coaching process to help people discover and clarify their callings. This is a special part of Pastor Andrew's ministry, so if you're interested in learning more and finding out about his availability to do life-callings coaching with you, reach out to him by email at [andrew@cornerstonechurch.ca](mailto:andrew@cornerstonechurch.ca).

The third and final means of goodness I'd like to mention is to **pay attention to what you fill your mind with.**

We saw in Romans 12 that we are not to conform to the world's way of thinking, but to let God's transform our minds by understanding what his will is, what his purposes are. And so it's very important to prayerfully consider what you fill your mind with.

What do you watch on TV, for example? What kind of movies do you watch? What do you look at and read online? Would you watch what you watch if Jesus were physically sitting next to you? That's a good litmus test for making decisions about what kind of entertainment you take in. And remember, Jesus is with you always even though you can't see him. He is indeed there in the room when you watch what you watch.

Do you make more space for social media in your life, or for Jesus? For news and political commentary, or for God? Are you more concerned about what Hollywood says is important, or what Jesus says is important?

Is much of your heart, mind, and energy given over to accumulating wealth and buying the things this commercialized world says you need to have to be successful? Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying it's wrong to watch TV and movies, or to use social media or to be successful in business or anything else. But what are you filling your mind and heart with? God's vision of what matters, or the world's vision?

To grow in goodness, all of us would do well to heed Paul's exhortation to the Philippians:

And now, dear brothers and sisters, one final thing. Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise.<sup>18</sup>

In fact, we've printed a whole bunch of scripture cards that have this verse on them. Ushers will have them when you leave here today, and here's a challenge: Why not take a few of these home with you, and put one near every screen you use. Tuck one into your phone case for example, or tape one inside your tablet case. Put one inside your laptop or near your TV screen. You get the idea, right? Take as many cards as you need, so that every time you go to look at a screen, you'll be thinking about how you think—about what you fill your mind with—and you'll be reminded to fix your thoughts on what is true, honorable, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent and worthy of praise. Amen?

Online worshippers, we've got you covered: you can find a downloadable copy of these scripture cards that you can print at home: [www.cornerstonechurch.ca/joy](http://www.cornerstonechurch.ca/joy).

This morning, we've explored the meaning of biblical goodness, which is all about fulfilling the purposes God has for us. And we looked at some means to grow in goodness. Now, let's begin to prepare our hearts for the Lord's Supper.

## **Communion**

The Christian affirmation that Jesus was fully human should serve as a welcome reminder that "being human" is not simply synonymous with being prone to error or sin. In light of the life of Jesus, who was made just like us in every way, except without sin, as the Bible says in Hebrews, we see that our problem is not that "we're only human" as the saying goes. Our problem is that we're not human enough.

Jesus was perfectly good, because he was everything a human being is meant to be. And Jesus died so that we could become like him— *truly human*— realizing the potential God has created and redeemed us for, now in part, and completely so when Jesus comes again.

Earlier, we talked about how God alone is the source of all goodness. No one is good, except God alone. Which means that our own goodness, if we have any, is a *derived*

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<sup>18</sup> Philippians 4:8 (NLT)

goodness. Our own goodness must come from God, because apart from God, we have no goodness— no chance of fulfilling the purposes he created us for.

We live in a self-help society that shapes us to think that we are competent to take care of our own problems, and to cultivate our own potential by looking inside ourselves. But the witness of the Bible is that you and I can never help ourselves enough.

We can never know or fulfill our purpose apart from God. But the good news is that we no longer need to strive to help ourselves— we don't have to figure out life on our own— because God has reached out to help us by sending Jesus to show us the way to live, and to die, rise again and give us his Spirit to make such a life possible for us.

You and I are invited today accept and receive the only help that is truly help— the help that God offers to us in Jesus Christ.

In coming to the Lord's Table today, you're saying, Jesus, apart from you, I can do nothing. Apart you, I have no goodness. In eating the bread and drinking the cup that Jesus offers us, we're saying, yes Jesus, I receive and feed on your goodness. Fill us with your goodness, Lord Jesus.

On the screen, you can see how the Lord's Supper will be served. When the usher signals your row, just line up at the appropriate station. Get bread and the cup, and then take them back to your seat with you, and once you're seated again you can eat and drink when ready.