

Titus 3:1-7; Matthew 19:16-22

“*A Fruitful Life of Goodness*”

“God is great; God is good. Let us thank Him for our food...”

A hundred times a day, in houses all around the county, families will bow their heads to pray this simple table grace before the meal. And hundreds of times, we are affirming that God is good!

But do you always experience God as *good*? Do *we believe* God is good?

The Bible teaches us the same lesson as this table grace:

The earth is full of the goodness of the Lord. (Psalm 33:5)

For the LORD is good; His steadfast love endures forever, and His faithfulness to all generations. (Psalm 100:5)

Will you affirm with the Bible that God is good? His character is good!

Ask any Mom what she’s teaching her child, and on the list will be something like this, “I want my child to be good.” Frankly, we have to be trained to be good, because goodness doesn’t come naturally to all of us. But “goodness” is totally natural to God!

God is good in His being. He is also good in His actions! God does good things! Always! When the Bible says God is good, it means He *acts* in good ways in our lives for His good purpose.

But the more personal problem revolves around the specific question: Is God good to me?

Sometimes we know God is good! He really is good to me! But other times, we wonder. Like when our teenager keeps making the same foolish choices, creating awful turmoil for the family, “Why can’t God be good to me?” Or our income doesn’t seem to keep up with our needs and we barely have enough for food and clothes. “Why can’t God be good to me?” Or illness strikes a home or our parents cease to be able to care for themselves. All the fun goes down the drain and all that’s left is agony and stress. God doesn’t seem good to us anymore.

So what happened? On the one hand we believe God is good; He’s been good to me! But on the other hand there are times we doubt His goodness. What changes?

It isn’t God. The Bible teaches that He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. God doesn’t change. He’s either good when good *and* bad things happen or He’s not good at all.

What changes is *our perception* or *our understanding* of God. When we experience good times, we see His goodness. When we experience tough times – well, it’s hard to *see* God as good.

It may help to understand “goodness” as we examine the difference between *kindness* and *goodness*. Last week we said that kindness was *action* paired with *compassion*. Kindness is something we *do*. But goodness isn’t something we do; it’s something we are! The goal of goodness is to make us like God; God wants to shape our character with faith, hope, holiness, and love!

But don’t miss this: Just as God is good to give us what makes us happy, He is happy to give us what makes us good! God consistently “works us,” molds and makes us, to the point where we will eventually resemble Him. Sometimes that means withholding what we *think* we need in order to provide what He *knows* we need. God knows that we seem to grow more deeply during the times when we are at our wits end and we have nothing to hold us up but Him!

But let's be careful we don't mis-hear this lesson: Does God make horrible stuff happen to us so that we will be more like Him? That's not what I understand from the Bible. But God can – and God does – use the toughest times to help us grow. He won't waste them! Those tough times become instruments in His hands to counsel and guide us! ¹

The Bible says, **“We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to His purpose.”** (Romans 8:28)

The Bible doesn't say, “All things are good,” but “all things work *together* for good.” God can shape good from out of bad. God can create resurrection for a dead man on a cross. And so God can bring life from the dead hopes and dreams in our lives!

But not everyone will discover the good that God is working out in their lives. The *good* is found by “those who love God, who are called according to His purpose”; for those who believe and are seeking Him!

Max Lucado writes about these awful seasons of life and says, “You'll get through this! You fear you won't. We all do. We feel stuck, trapped, locked in. Will we ever exit this pit? Yes! Because deliverance is to the Bible what jazz music is to Mardi Gras!” As surely as you'll find the bold, brassy sounds of jazz everywhere at Mardi Gras, you can bet you will find deliverance for those who love the Lord!

Look! Out of the lion's den for Daniel! Out of the whale's belly for Jonah! And freedom from the prison for Paul!

Through the Red Sea ...on dry ground. Through the wilderness, through the valley of the shadow of death. Through! It's a favorite word of God's. “Yea, though I walk *through* the valley of the shadow of death!” God doesn't want you to be lost *in* the awfulness, but He intends to bring you *through*!

“It won't be painless. Have you wept your final tear? Have you received your last round of chemotherapy? Not necessarily. Does God guarantee the absence of struggle? Not in this life. We see Satan's tricks and ploys, but God sees Satan tripped and foiled. You'll get through this!”

The Bible reminds us that we live in a fallen world where a good heart is not always rewarded and a mean streak is not always punished! When we see a good man like Job suffering we say, “That's not right!” And it isn't! But sadly, our world is like that.

Through Job's life we can see that faith in God is justified even when our situation in life looks hopeless. Too often we base our faith on rewards or prosperity – if things are going good, we believe and praise the Lord! And if things are miserable, we are ready to give up on God!

But when we do this, we are basing faith on how well we feel at a moment in time. To be unshakable, faith has to be built on the confidence that God's ultimate purpose and goodness will come to pass!

Are you confident that God is good and God will act to bring good to you?

That's our key lesson: **We can have faith in God's goodness despite our worst circumstances.**

Let me give you another example.

When Becky was growing up in North Carolina, she pretended she was Princess Rose and

¹ Sermon resource is “*Naked Fruit*”; by Elisa Morgan; Revell; Grand Rapids, Michigan; 2004

she would someday marry the man of her dreams! Well, following a college romance she married Sonny Smith who became *more* than the husband of her fairy-tales. Sonny became her best friend.

The Smiths were teachers in Hendersonville, North Carolina. Sonny was the high school band director, and Becky taught kindergarten.

But then Becky's dream was shattered when she heard the words, "There's been an accident!"

In one swift moment, she lost half her family – her husband and her 12-year old son, Greg – were killed in a plane crash. Twelve months after, we hear from Becky in her own words: My will to survive was almost gone ...When I tried to sleep, visions of that awful accident invaded my dreams. It went on like this for weeks; for months!

Finally I turned back the covers and stumbled through the darkness to Greg's room ...In utter despair, I screamed aloud, "God, if You're there and if You're real, You've got to help me! I can't go on like this!"

Not long after that frightful night, God did come to visit me in an unexpected way. He slipped quietly beside me on the steps of my classroom and used a little boy named Mark to teach me about Himself.

I looked up to see Mark chasing several girls with a stick. Mark was so tiny, I didn't think he had the strength to hurt them. Actually, I was glad to see him mingling with another child! Mark was my puzzle and challenge. His frail body was spaghetti thin, his brown eyes nearly blank. In the classroom, he usually sat on the floor, folded his bony knees together, and stared at the carpet ...never looking directly at me.

Becky said, "You know, Mark, I had a little boy just like you. His name was Greg, but I don't have him anymore. He died." Mark looked up at me as I continued, "Greg loved Matchbox cars. Do you like those cars?"

He shook his head intensely.

"I'll tell you what I'm going to do. Tomorrow I'll bring you one of Greg's cars. Would you like that? I know Greg would like you to have one."

Mark nodded again and gently relaxed. I felt some of the fight drain out of him. I began to hum and rock. In a while, his body went limp as he fell asleep. I cradled him in my arms and wiped the perspiration from his tiny forehead.

Ever so quietly, God crept into my heart and whispered softly to me, "Becky, you're just like Mark. I've tried to talk with you all these months, but you kicked and screamed so loudly you couldn't hear Me. It's okay. I know you're hurt. I've just held you tightly until you calmed down. If you let Me now, I'll cradle you in My arms, and you can rest. You can trust Me. I won't let you go." (*Keepsakes from the Heart* by Becky Smith-Greer)

Do you know this is what your heavenly Father wants to say to you, too!

Not all things are good, but God can work in all things to bring goodness into your life!

It doesn't seem possible that good could ever come out of what appears as a hopeless situation. But to those who love God and are called according to His purpose – **We can have faith in God's goodness despite our worst circumstances!**

Will you trust in the goodness of God now – and in all things?

God *is* good! And God *is* love! So God is being good to you! But hear this, it takes eyes

of faith to believe that! Will you trust Him to be good to you? Do you trust God enough to look for His good from out of a bad situation?

And to bring goodness into your heart?

Listen to how the Bible describes “goodness.” [from Jesus: READING Matthew 19:16-22]

¹⁶ Someone came to Jesus with this question: “Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?”

¹⁷ “Why ask me about what is good?” Jesus replied. “There is only One who is good. But to answer your question—if you want to receive eternal life, keep the commandments.”

¹⁸ “Which ones?” the man asked.

And Jesus replied: “‘You must not murder. You must not commit adultery. You must not steal. You must not testify falsely. ¹⁹ Honor your father and mother. Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

²⁰ “I’ve obeyed all these commandments,” the young man replied. “What else must I do?”

²¹ Jesus told him, “If you want to be perfect, go and sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

²² But when the young man heard this, he went away very sad, for he had many possessions.

This young man was already a good person! He’s been respectful to neighbors, an honorable man with the Law of God! Jesus told him what “good” he needed to do: keep God’s Commandments! Jesus listed six of them, all referring to relationships with others. When the young man replied that he had kept the commandments, Jesus told him that he must do something more – sell everything and give the money to the poor.

It was a tough challenge! **“Sell ...and come, follow Me!”** (Matthew 19:21)

But Jesus said this to convince him that he had, by no means, kept the commandments. In reality, his wealth was his god, his idol, and Jesus helped him come to the point that he could see his sin! He had violated the first and greatest commandment, loving something more than God!

And here we find the contrast between what the world thinks is good and how God measures good. The goodness God offers is a *relationship*, a relationship of forgiveness and love. But the young man turned Him down.

And I want you to hear this, too: This was not a universal command for everyone to sell all that you have. It was a challenge to this individual who measured his goodness by the way he treated other men.

But this young man goes the way of many of us. He goes away, shocked by what it cost to *follow* Jesus! But we all stagger a bit at this point!

You won’t follow, you won’t trust God, unless you believe in His goodness – and you believe that your goodness falls short, because of your own selfishness. And in case you’re confused about assessing goodness in your life, the Bible teaches, **“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same... But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High...”** (Luke 6:32-33, 35a)

It’s not “good” to love those who you like! Everyone does that!

Are you being created new with the goodness of God?

In order to receive the goodness of God in our lives, a goodness that we can't raise up on our own, we have to believe that God is good! And only as we believe in God's goodness will we want to love Him and come to trust Him!

It's not too late!

Though your past can't be changed, your past doesn't have to define who you are or determine your future. It's not too late to live in the hope and the high calling that are yours in Christ Jesus! Regardless what you've done or what others have done to you, regardless of the depth of the pit you're in, God can still restore and use you because He offers you grace and mercy, forgiveness and love!

So don't be misled, my dear brothers and sisters. Whatever is good and perfect comes down to us from God our Father, who created all the lights in the heavens. He never changes... [James 1:16-17 (NLT)]

Open your heart to trust in God's goodness!