

Goodness • Galatians 5:22–23

How are you?

Some people answer that question by saying, “I am well, thank you.” And, when they do, I think to myself, “You got an A in grammar, didn’t you? Because otherwise you wouldn’t answer a question that way.” Some say, “O.K., I guess.” Usually that means life is tough, you’re tired and you really don’t want to talk about it. But, most people, simply say, “Good.”

And, that is the answer God wants to hear - that we’re doing “good” – because we, as Christians, have “the fruit of the Spirit (which) is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, GOODNESS, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” To be a Christian is to be like Jesus Christ. The New Testament describes him as, “Jesus of Nazareth who went around doing good.”

Goodness is an especially interesting flavor of this nine-flavor recipe that the Bible says should characterize the Christian life because it doesn’t always taste the same.

Have you ever tasted vanilla extract?” It is the strangest stuff. It smells fantastic! The first time I smelled it I wanted to drink the whole bottle. My mother said, “Would you like to try some?” I poured out a big spoonful and swooshed it into my mouth with anticipation and delight. It tastes terrible! It was disgusting! It makes you wonder how vanilla ice cream can be the most popular flavor in America. How can something that has the same name, in one context be so good, and at other times taste so bad?

And, so it is with goodness. It sounds great. But the flavor of the fruit of the Spirit called goodness can range broadly from bitter to

sweet. Let me explain.

Years ago there was a physician who was forced by circumstances to operate on his own son. They were far away from medical facilities and there was no one else who could save the boy’s life. It promised to be stressful for the father and painful for the son.

As that dad tried his best to explain to his son what he was going to do, he used a wonderful line. The surgeon father said, “Son, I may hurt you, but I will never harm you.”

Every parent knows the difficulty of doing good for your child when it seems to that child that you are causing them pain.

I remember more than one emergency room visit when our children were little and wounded. It’s hard to let your baby be strapped into restraints while a stranger probes a painful cut and sews up the skin. The look in your child’s eyes says, “Why are you letting them do this to me? I thought you loved me!” But what I did was good. It was best for my child.

The greatest goodness of all is the goodness that seeks God’s best for others. It is not always what people would choose for themselves. It is often not what others want. Sometimes they don’t like the taste. But God’ best

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is always good!

Goodness is seeing to it that God’s will is done on earth as God’s will is done in heaven!

Goodness operates by standards. God’s standards are essential to what goodness is all about. The simplest expression of it is found in the Ten Commandants. The standards for God’s good always mean that we seek to put God first in other people’s lives. Goodness

always promotes the truth. Goodness always protects human life. Goodness preserves marriage against the terrible assault of adultery. Goodness honors parents and possessions against abuse and theft. An everyday test is to always ask the question, “What would God want for her? What would God like to have as far as he’s concerned?” And, then, to do whatever that is.

That also means that goodness is a long-term investment in the other person’s life. The financial investment community often counsels those who buy stocks to invest for the long term. Don’t buy today with the plan to sell tomorrow. Invest in a way that will get you where you need to be in retirement.

Goodness is the same kind of investment. It is a growth stock.

Think of someone specific who could use some goodness. Now, try to imagine how God would like that person to be in ten, twenty, maybe thirty years from now. Goodness involves here and now. It may be a note of encouragement or a phone call. It may be financial assistance or helping someone get a job. It could be taking someone out to dinner. But goodness always has the long-term in mind, too. And it is always in terms of God’s best, by God’s standards. The good person dreams and works for the best for someone else’s tomorrow.

One of the most appetizing aspects of this flavor of the fruit of the Spirit called goodness is generosity. Goodness can be extraordinarily generous. We hear of a woman, for example, who donates her kidney to another person so that person may live. Few of us will ever be called upon to make such a great sacrifice. But that is an extremely generous act.

Most of us deal on a much smaller scale. For us, generosity is measured in a few dollars, a couple of hours, showing a genuine con-

cern or sharing an experience. Goodness is whatever we have to do to give generously of ourselves for the benefit of someone else.

I know what a wonderful thing that is to be the recipient of such generosity. When I was a college student, broke and uncertain about my future, a man whose business was based in New York City took an interest in me. This businessman took me out to dinner and talked to me and listened to me and encouraged me. He offered to help me financially to get through school.

Over the years I’ve thought a thousand times about the enormous difference he made in my life. I’ve told him, I’ve written to him and I’ve thanked him for his goodness and generosity.

I want to be like him. I want to be the agent for God’s goodness in other people’s lives, just as others have been God’s agents of goodness in my life. I want to be generous, too!

If you’ve been tracking with me on this flavor called “goodness”, you must be asking a few tough questions. Maybe the toughest is, “How do you know what’s good?”

Suppose you get a call from a co-worker who asks you to lend him \$1000 to get him out of a jam. You don’t have \$1000, but you could sell something or get a salary advance or borrow it on your Visa card.

The problem is that you are not sure what’s good. Maybe the good thing is to lend him the money and help him get out of trouble. But maybe the good thing is to not help him so that he’ll learn not to get into trouble again.

It takes some “supernatural smarts” to figure out what to do. And God offers to us supernatural wisdom. So, let’s make a checklist of how to get it.

First on that checklist is that we need to check our own hearts to see whether the motivation is first and foremost to do good. There

is really no point in asking God to show us what is good if we're not going to do anything about it once we find out.

The second thing we need to do is to pray and ask God for wisdom. The Bible tells us that when we don't know what to do we should ask God for wisdom and he will give it to us.

Third, we need to listen to God for the answer. God gives us answers in different ways. He gives us answers through his book the Bible. It's amazing how many times, when we have asked God questions, he has already written out the answer for us. We need to listen to the godly counsel of other Christians. Often they have experienced similar dilemmas and, out of their own experience with God, they know God's wisdom for us. And, we need to hear the witness of God to our spirit.

Let me explain. When a person becomes a Christian, the Holy Spirit of God comes to live inside us and the Spirit actually talks to our spirit. Super-

natural communication takes place so that when our spirit is tuned to the Holy Spirit of God, we can hear what the Spirit of God has to say. Then, what's left to do is what God and his wisdom have shown us to do, and then step back and discover the miraculous ways in which God takes the good and multiplies it until it mushrooms into something far greater than we would ever imagine possible.

However, let me warn you that trying to be good without God's wisdom can not only be disappointing, it can be disastrous. Being good is a tricky business requiring supernatural help!

If you do all of this, what should you expect? Well, don't be surprised if your goodness is misunderstood!

When I was a boy I watched a TV movie that was based upon a true story. I wish I could recall the exact names and dates because it would make the retelling much more powerful.

It was the story of two Plebes, or freshmen, at the United States Military Academy at West Point. One was from a poor family. The other was from a rich family.

The poor Plebe was going to resign and leave West Point because of a family financial crisis at home.

The rich Plebe found out and wanted to help, but he knew that his friend would not

accept it. So he did something that he knew broke the rules. He sneaked off the Academy grounds one night and found his way to a telephone. He phoned his father and asked him to anonymously send whatever money was needed to his friend's family. It was a

very good thing to do.

Except the rich cadet was caught. He was asked to explain what he was doing. He refused to tell, even though it surely would have gotten him out of trouble. He just wanted the best for his friend. As a result, for the next four years no one spoke to him. No conversations at meals. No help with assignments. He wasn't even called on when he raised his hand in class. For four years he suffered the silent treatment . . . because he was misunderstood for doing good.

Don't be surprised if your life is flavored with goodness and you, too, are misunderstood.

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The other choice is to do that which is bad. Is it better to do evil so that people will accept us and like us? Romans 12:21 says, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

One final point for all of us who want to flavor of goodness to be strong in our lives. It is that this goodness that God talks about reaches out and grabs the opportunity. Galatians 5:22-23 says that “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, GOODNESS, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”

Compare that to Galatians 6:9-10 which expands on the practice of goodness in our Christian lives and says, “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.”

God makes it clear. Hang in there. Don't quit. You'll get a great reward from God. There are lots of opportunities all around. Grab every one you can . . . especially the opportunities to be good to other Christians.

To close, let me share with you the true story of a man who was really good, because it so well demonstrates all that we have been talking about concerning goodness. This man had it made. He was super rich. But he was a good man who was really burdened for other people with all their pains and problems and

sins. And so he did a breathtaking thing. He gave up everything in order to help others. It cost him his life. He was murdered by some of the very people he had given up his wealth to help. What's especially shocking is that he knew he was going to be murdered and he went ahead and did it anyway so he could help them. He was so good.

His biographer wrote “that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.” It is the true, the fantastic, story of that very good man, Jesus. He sought our best. He kept all the standards. He looked to the long term of our eternal destiny. He generously gave his own life. He was wise. He was misunderstood. And he grabbed the opportunity to save us sinners from our sin.

If you are not a Christian, accept his goodness and become one.

If you are a Christian, pass his goodness on to others.

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