

SPIRITUAL FRUIT

Goodness

Galatians 5:22-25

Goodness! ABC's hit series *Lost* is about a group of people struggling to survive after a plane crash leaves them stranded on an island in the Pacific. They think they are alone on the Island; but then, they discover there are Others. Henry Gale is the leader of the Others. In last seasons finale one of the castaways asks Henry who the Others are. Henry responds, "We're the good guys."¹

Goodness is the state or quality of being good. So, how then do we become one of the good guys or good gals? According to Paul goodness is a virtue that God's spirit produces in our life. As with the other virtues we have discussed—love, joy, peace, patience and kindness—we already have goodness. So the answer to the question of how do we become one of the good guys or gals is to live what we already have. It is to access goodness from our spiritual nature.

Matthew records in two separate places what Jesus has to say about being good. I want to share Jesus' words but first I want to warn you that what he says is some tough stuff that may even be a bit unsettling for us. Using the same fruit analogy that Paul does Jesus says, "*Either make the tree good, and its fruit good; or make the tree bad, and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit...How can you speak good things when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person brings good things out of a good treasure. I tell you, there will come a day that you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter; for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.*"²

Jesus indicates that if we are accessing our spiritual nature we will produce good and not evil—a good tree produces good fruit. And according to Jesus one way to determine how good we are is by evaluating the words that we speak.

Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me. What a big lie! Jesus says that a day will come when we will have to give an account for every careless word we have spoken. I do not believe that Jesus says this to implant fear in us but rather to help us understand how important words are. Words can cut deeper and more painfully than any knife. And sadly, in my thirty years of professional ministry I have heard an abundance of cutting words come out of the mouths of Christian/church folk.

It is amazing to me how some Christians can so easily raise their hands in praise to God while simultaneously opening their mouth to berate, belittle and cut to shreds other folk. Jesus says, "*For out of the heart the mouth speaks.*" As believers our goal needs to be that our hearts will be guided by our spiritual nature which means we will **live** love, joy, peace, patience, kindness and goodness. This means we will not speak evil to or of each other because our hearts, our emotions, are in the process of being spiritually transformed so that we will not think or feel evil of each other. We speak evil because we feel evil. The spiritual

virtue of goodness begins in the heart and then is demonstrated in our words and in our actions.

This brings us to the second reading in Matthew's gospel regarding Jesus' words on being good. (Read Matthew 19:16-22)

Not only does Jesus indicate that goodness is demonstrated by how we speak to others but also by how we treat others. It does not take Jesus long to catch on to the young man who wants to know how to have eternal life. The fellow is expecting, even wanting, Jesus to give some religious doctrinal answer about God. What Jesus does is tell him to obey the commandments that speak to how we should treat each other including loving one's neighbor. But then Jesus goes a step further and indicates that loving in one's heart is not enough. Goodness requires loving with action even to the point of personal sacrifice.

Goodness is a spiritual virtue that is totally focused on our neighbor—on others. My friends, we can claim we love God all day long but if we do not demonstrate goodness towards others, in our words and in our actions, our claim of loving God is in question.

In Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus he writes, "*For we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.*"³ We ask how do we become a good guy or gal? We live our purpose for which God created us—to do good works. Which Jesus indicates is demonstrated in our words and actions towards others.

Goodness is a product of our spiritual nature. Learning to live from our spiritual nature is a part of our life-long journey. Living from our spiritual nature is transforming. We are transformed into what God created us to be—people of goodness. To the congregation at Colossae Paul writes, "*...we have not ceased praying for you that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may lead lives...fully pleasing to God in everything, as you **bear fruit in every good work** and as you grow in the knowledge of God.*"⁴

Our spiritual transformation takes place not only in our heart, our emotions, but also in our mind. Spiritual transformation requires that we think differently. The old ways do not work. The silent treatment does not work. Passive-aggressive behavior does not work. Stinginess does not work. Snubbing our noses at those in need does not work. For you see we are created by God for good works. And further, Paul informs us that our good works which emanate from our spiritual nature will help to remind those whom we have demonstrated goodness towards of their spiritual nature. Good works produce other good works!

Today's lesson on goodness and spiritual transformation can be summarized like this—*there was a Cherokee man teaching his grandchildren about life. He says to them, "A fight is going on inside me. It is between two wolves. One wolf is evil—he is fear, anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, anxiety, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, competition and superiority. The other wolf is good—he is joy, peace, love, hope, sharing, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, friendship, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, faith and laughter."*

He then tells his grandchildren that the same fight is going on inside of them and also inside of every person. The children think about this for a moment and then one of them asks his grandfather, "Which wolf will win?"

The old man then replies, "The one that you feed."⁵

¹ Florida Times Union, Please Define Good by Tom Szaroleta, October 11, 2006.

² Matthew 12:33-37

³ Ephesians 2:10

⁴ Colossians 1:9-10

⁵ Donald O'Dell, *How the Bible became the Bible*, page 1.