

“Goodness”

Matthew 12:33-37

August 6, 2023

INTRODUCTION:

The sixth fruit of the Spirit is goodness. The word used in the Galatians 5 list is not a common word in the New Testament, occurring only three other times outside of Galatians 5. The other three appearances of the word don't help us very much in locating its meaning. Romans 15:14 is typical, where Paul says that he is convinced that the Christians in Rome are full of goodness, which doesn't tell us much about its meaning. There is a related adjective that is usually translated “good,” and it appears over one hundred times in the New Testament. It seems to be a general word, too, and is often contrasted with that which is evil.

Our English word “good” is also a general word with a wide range of meaning, usually taking its meaning from its context. If someone remarks, “That's a good engine,” the meaning of good depends on the context. A good engine for a farm tractor would not be good if put in a race car. In the passage we're looking at this morning, Jesus speaks about what is good in a person, taking us straight to the heart of the matter.

The word “good” appears six times in our passage, used of a good tree, good fruit, a good heart, good words and good treasure. Jesus' basic point is that just as good fruit comes from a good tree, so good words and actions come from a good heart. And how are we to get a good heart? It comes only through a right relationship with Jesus, unlike those who are guilty of the unforgiveable sin. That is the topic just preceding our passage, and Matthew undoubtedly means to make a connection between the evil heart and the unforgiveable sin.

I. The Components of Goodness

The basic meaning of the passage can be found in Jesus' metaphor about the tree and its fruit. **“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”** (v. 33). Jesus isn't seeking to give a lesson in horticulture, but in human nature. Specifically, he is talking about a person's words. We know that because he says in the next verse, **“You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks”** (v. 34).

He is talking about the words of the Pharisees who had just spoken great evil against Jesus. They had witnessed the work of the Holy Spirit through the

power of Jesus in the casting out of demons. Instead of responding to that with the good words that “Jesus is Lord,” they responded with words of great evil. **“It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons”** (12:24). That’s what led Jesus to call them a brood of vipers. They were as unable to speak the good words about Jesus as a viper is unable to give nourishing milk.

It is in this arena of evil words that Jesus warns about the unforgiveable sin. One of the common questions pastors hear concerns the nature of this unforgiveable sin. People read of that and wonder if they have perhaps committed that sin. Jesus calls it *blasphemy* against the Spirit. To blaspheme is to speak insulting, slanderous things about God. So what does it mean to insult the Holy Spirit? Let me make a couple of general statements before getting specific. First, common pastoral practice is to tell people that if they are worried about whether or not they have committed this sin, that is a pretty clear indicator that they have not. I think that is right. To be troubled by Jesus’ warning means that you are taking his warning seriously, which is precisely what the Holy Spirit leads us to do.

A second general statement is that we can conclude that the Pharisees who were speaking against Jesus here had not yet committed this sin, though they were certainly on the road to doing so. I conclude that they had not yet committed this sin based on the simple fact that Jesus is warning them about it. If it is unforgiveable and they have already committed it, what’s the point of warning them about it? It’s too late to do anything about it. It’s not easy to commit this sin.

What exactly, then, is the unforgiveable sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit? While the Pharisees hadn’t yet committed this sin, the fact that Jesus warns them about it indicates that they are on the road to committing it unless they repent. What road are they on? They are in the process of rejecting Jesus despite the overwhelming evidence that he is the Son of God. They have seen his miracles. They have heard of lives transformed by his healing and his preaching and teaching. The Holy Spirit has been at work, but they are hardening their hearts against his work and encouraging others to do the same. This is my conclusion about this sin. It is the repeated and deliberate rejection of Jesus despite the work of the Holy Spirit to draw us to him, and the resulting attempt to ruin Jesus in the eyes of others. It is not enough for those guilty of this sin to reject Jesus themselves. They must also bring as many as possible with them.

A key component of goodness, then, is to speak good words about Jesus instead of bad, blasphemous words. By extension, then, goodness of heart requires goodness of speech. Jesus said it like this: **“For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks”** (v. 34). If your speech is good, it is because your heart is good. How can you know if your heart is good? Jesus

says that the best indicator is found in careless words. Careless words are the ones you don't give a great deal of thought to. They are the opposite of heavily edited, well-considered words. They are the ones that come out before you've had a lot of opportunity to think about it. They're often the words we feel the need to take back after they are spoken, declaring such things as "Oh, I didn't really mean that" or "I was just kidding." A friend of mine tells about a meeting he was in once where there were two or three pastors present with about twelve other non-pastors. After a particularly insightful comment by one of the pastors, a successful businessman present remarked, "You're pretty smart for a pastor." As soon as he said it, he realized that he had just insulted all the pastors in the room. His "unedited" word revealed what he really thought of pastors. If you had asked him, "Are pastors dumber than most successful businessmen?" he would have certainly answered in the negative. But his "careless" word revealed more accurately what he really thought.

What do your words reveal about the presence of this fruit of the Spirit in your life? Are your unedited words marked by such things as boasting, gossip, criticism, and self-righteous judgmentalism? Or are they words of encouragement, truth, love, and gentleness? Are your words the reliable words of a promise-keeper or the unreliable words of a promise-breaker? Do you exaggerate your accomplishments and excuse your failures?

II. The Necessity of Goodness

The necessity of goodness, as indicated by good words, is made clear in verse 37. **"For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."** Jesus is not teaching salvation by works here. Rather, he is speaking in a way consistent with the rest of Scripture, which teaches everywhere that salvation is by faith alone, but the faith that saves us slowly begins to change us from the inside out. Such heart change is seen in our words.

It is not uncommon for evangelical Christians to be so anxious to guard against the error of salvation by works that we downplay the importance of good works in the Christian life. We can minimize this fruit of the Spirit in the process. No New Testament author emphasized more strongly than the apostle Paul that salvation is by faith and not by works. It is also the case that Paul emphasized the necessity of good works for the Christian. Listen, for example, to the well-known passage in Ephesians 2:8-10. **"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."**

Multiple other passages from Paul could be cited, all of which emphasize the importance of good works for the Christian. I'll just offer a sampling. Paul told Titus, **"And I want you to stress these things, so that those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good"** (3:8). In his letter to the Romans, he wrote, **"Hate what is evil; cling to what is good"** (12:9). To the Galatians, Paul wrote, **"Let us not become weary in doing good...as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers"** (Gal. 6:9-10). There are many more that could be cited, but let me mention just one more. In Romans 12:21 Paul writes, **"Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."** Doing good, exhibiting this fruit of goodness, is not some bland pursuit. Rather, it is a militant act by which we overcome evil itself. To practice goodness is to go on the offensive against the forces of evil and darkness.

III. The Source of Goodness

How, then, do we acquire this fruit of goodness? Jesus tells us in his metaphor about the tree and its fruit. **"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"** (v. 33). To exhibit the fruit of goodness, all you need to do is to make your heart good. But isn't that a little like telling the cancer patient, "All you need to do to be well is to kill all the cancer growing in your body?" It's a true statement, but it's not helpful because it's beyond one's abilities. But there is one for whom it is not beyond his ability, and that is our Lord Jesus. Jesus' words about the necessity of a new heart are a call to conversion.

Notice verse 35. **"The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil."** Goodness is more an overflow of what is inside than a product of good strategy or resolutions. It is an overflow from the "good treasure," which is a reference to the gospel of Jesus. Notice the good news that is found in the previous section. Though most attention is usually focused on the unforgiveable sin, don't skip the words just before that. **"Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people"** (v. 31). Let's pause and celebrate the wonderful truth here from the mouth of Jesus. No matter what sin there is in your life, it is forgivable unless it is this one unforgiveable sin. Adultery, murder, slander, blasphemy, kidnapping, bank robbery, drug dealing, sexual abuse and many more are forgivable sins for the one who repents and believes. This is Jesus talking, not some lame self-help guru trying to sell a book. Jesus is the one who does the forgiving, and we have it on his authority that these sins are able to be forgiven. Do not let Satan tell you his lies that your sin is worse than that of others, and therefore beyond God's forgiveness. Do not let Satan keep you from believing what Jesus says here by just agreeing with it in theory but not receiving it into your own heart. Sometimes people say to me, "I'm having a hard time forgiving myself." That is a sure indication that you

have not heard what Jesus says here. You have not received this good treasure that Jesus says is the source of all goodness in our lives. If there is some sin in your past that makes you break out into a cold sweat when you think about it, apply the words of Jesus to it. Jesus says this sin is forgivable. Receive his forgiveness.

CONCLUSION:

In the conclusion of his book about forgiveness, Tim Keller mentions the 1984 movie *Places in the Heart*. The movie is set in a small, segregated Texas town during the depression. Sally Field stars as Edna Spalding, who suddenly becomes a young widow when her husband, Royce, the town sheriff, is shot to death accidentally by a drunk Black teenager. Racist members of the town find Wylie, the Black shooter, and tie him to the back of a truck and drag him to death. Without her husband's salary, Edna has trouble paying the bank loan on the farm. Most of the movie shows her struggling to save the farm, aided by a blind man who rents a room from her, and a Black farmhand named Moze (played by Danny Glover). Together, they manage to save the farm by winning a hundred-dollar prize for growing the season's earliest bale of cotton. But then the members of the Ku Klux Klan nearly beat to death Moze, her black farmhand. His life is saved only when Mr. Will, her blind border, recognizes the voices of the hooded Klansmen and begins naming them.

The movie ends in a way that is unique for such movies. We expect the typical Hollywood ending of Edna being able to save the farm even after all the struggles they endured. But that is not the way it ends. It concludes with a church service in which communion is served. The camera focuses on only two people at a time as they pass the elements to one another and whisper, "Peace of God." When the camera shows Moze, it becomes clear that the movie has left this-world reality, because no church in depression era Texas would have been racially integrated. And then we see Edna, who hands the tray to her husband, Royce Spalding, who in turn hands it to Wylie, the black youth who shot him.

Such goodness can only come from the thing being remembered in the communion service itself, the broken body and shed blood of our Lord Jesus. He is the good treasure in the heart from which all good comes. Through faith in him, hearts are transformed and become truly good as we follow the one who is the epitome and source of goodness.