

"THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT IS...GOODNESS..."

Pilgrim Church, Duluth

October 20, 1974

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Let me make a confession. I was going to slip one by you this week. As some of you know, I got myself started on preaching sermons on all these terms by which Paul describes what he calls "fruits of the Spirit" in the Letter to the Galatians. I've talked about love, joy, peace, kindness, and two weeks from today I look forward to lifting up among you that fruit of the Spirit which Evelyn Underhill summed up in a marvelous phrase. "Faithfulness," she said, "is consecration in overalls."

But to return to my confession. Up until about noon on Thursday, I was going to try to tackle "faithfulness" today. Which is to say, I was going to skip "goodness" entirely. I didn't think that anybody would miss "goodness" if I left it out.

What's the matter with goodness? Nothing, of course, except that it is an extremely general kind of a term. It's so general that it's hard to get a handle on. After all, you could say that all the other qualities we have been discussing fit under the label of goodness. I went into every library in town looking for commentaries to see if possibly the word that Paul used possessed some special slant that would make it more specific for our purposes. But it seems that Paul's Greek term was almost as wide-ranging as our own. I suppose if that sugary-voiced fellow had rung Paul up and asked him to sing the Campbell soup jingle, the great apostle might have responded with a variation of the same term, um um agathós, um um agathós.

I must say, though, that is about the last thing I can imagine Paul doing.

In Paul's Greek, agathosune covered almost as much territory as our word, "goodness." Yet we can narrow it down this much. In the New Testament it is not Campbell soup goodness, but personal goodness that people have in mind when they use this word. It takes in both the idea of moral uprightness and of kindheartedness. It is goodness in human relations.

Now that is still very broad. But sometimes there is value in thinking in broad terms. Before you start talking about the particular ingredients of goodness, you need to have some notion of how the total product is supposed to shape up. What does it mean to be a good man or a good woman? What is a good person like? What does goodness mean to people living in our society today? Just as I was on the verge of chucking a sermon on goodness out of the window, such questions as those came to mind. It occurred to me that we haven't been giving much attention to what goodness means in recent years. And that is one reason why we find ourselves facing a crisis in goodness right now.

So with that thought in mind, I decided to frame a sermon for you by posing three more questions.

The first question is this. What are the models of goodness in our culture? Who are the people whether in fiction or in fact that we hold up as examples of goodness to our children? Where do we get our inspirational illustrations of personal goodness? What are the models?

My impression is that in most cultures in times past there were models. For example, throughout much of Christian history certain outstanding Christians who were called "saints" became models. Up until recently devout Roman Catholics still were brought up on the lives of the saints. Protestants discarded most of the saints, but they made models of biblical characters. And as time went on the Protestants produced certain heroes of their own who paraded through the Sunday School reading books. The power of such models cannot be overstated. Many a young man became a missionary because he was inspired by the story of St. Francis Xavier; many a young woman became a nurse because she wanted to imitate Florence Nightingale.

We are all aware, of course, that sometimes these old models were overworked or worked in the wrong way. The expression "plaster saint" sums up what happened. Increasingly people got turned off by sentimental, unrealistic and narrowly moralistic images of goodness.

But where are our models today? Whatever our intentions may be, the actual working models in our day seem to be found mostly in what we call the world of the celebrities. That world is composed mainly of three branches, the entertainment celebrities, including the fictional characters in the stories they create, the sports celebrities, who are really an extension of the entertainment industry, and the political celebrities, who likewise seem increasingly to become an arm of that same industry. Our models are the likes of the Godfather, Joe Namath and Spiro Agnew.

Of course, we may not see in that particular list the most going models at the moment. Admittedly the political models are in need of some winding up. But that is the arena from which our society draws its inspirational figures. The goals such figures represent are the goals upon which our children are encouraged, at least unconsciously, to set their sights.

Are they models of goodness? If not, where are the models of goodness in our culture? My theory is that no culture can nurture goodness without such models? Where are they?

That is my first question.

My second question is this: Is personal goodness a major goal in our culture?

Let's consider a rather fantastic possibility. Suppose there is a typical American, middle-class couple who apply for the adoption of a child. Now it happens that the adoption worker is clairvoyant to a degree never before achieved in human history. She sees into the future and she is never wrong about what she sees. So, the worker says to the couple, I have two very nice babies from whom you may take your pick. One of them is going to grow up to be a day laborer. But he will be a good, upright, kind-hearted man, a faithful husband and father and an all-round nice guy. To be honest with you the other baby will grow up to be a rather nasty character. He'll be involved in a number of sleazy deals, he'll cheat on his wife and alienate his children. But he's also going to be president of General Motors.

Which baby do you think that typical, middle-class American couple would pick?

Our society is still influenced by what might be called the self-improvement movement. It isn't as strong as it was half a century ago. But self-improvement books of one sort or another still make the best-seller lists.

Now what goals do people usually seek in their effort to improve themselves? Well, some seek muscles like Charles Atlas and some seek peace of mind like Norman Vincent Peale. Some want to win friends and influence people like Dale Carnegie. Others want to improve their memories like it tells in that latest book on the market. Everybody wants to learn how to make a lot of money. But do any of the self-improvement books tell us how to be good?

Admittedly there is some danger in trying to be good. People who try to be good in too self-conscious a way are likely to end up becoming goody goody. Still the question remains. Is personal goodness a major goal in our society?

My third question is: Is personal goodness a major goal in religion?

You will answer, everybody knows that religion is supposed to be concerned with building character. But I am not asking what religion is supposed to be concerned about. I am asking what in fact people look for in religion.

Let us think in turn about both the more conventional forms of religion, and then about some of the more far-out forms we have around today.

In the case of conventional religion one may agree quite readily that people expect it to promote goodness in other people. For example, they expect religion to make their children good.

I was only in the ministry a few months when I heard that a boy who was loosely connected to my congregation was in jail. I called on his mother, a woman whom I learned had a rather unsavory reputation. I was prepared to believe the best about her; in those days I was more naive. But even then I recognized that something was wrong when she said, "I can't figure out why he turned out this way. I always sent him to Sunday School."

Since then I have heard that statement repeated by others a good many times. "Why did he turn out this way? I sent him to Sunday School."

Well, these people expected the church to make their children good. There was nothing wrong in that except that they expected so slender a resource to provide so much, especially when in most cases their children's participation in Sunday School was rather meager. And sometimes one had the feeling that while they expected religion to make their children good, it never occurred to them to apply the same expectations to themselves. Personal goodness was not for them a matter of religious quest. How then was such a quest to rub off on their children?

People expect religion to nurture goodness in other people. But do they seek goodness from religion themselves? I think that I would have to say that in my experience this is not a primary motivation.

Turning to some of the less conventional religious movements, I find I am led to the same conclusion. No doubt there is much good in many of

these movements. Some of them do show a concern for a value-centered lifestyle that is very encouraging. In any case, religion should not be reduced to mere morality. But whether it be systems of Eastern meditation, or the revival of witchcraft, or the old-time revivalism to the tune of rock guitars it does not seem to me that the quest for personal goodness is a main attraction.

I pose then these three questions. Where are the models of goodness? Is personal goodness a major goal in our culture? And is it a religious goal? You may answer the questions as you will. I am inclined to answer "nowhere" to the first one and "no" to the other two. That may sound like negative thinking, but the positive thinking cult wasn't oriented much around goodness either.

Still that is not to say that there is no goodness around any more. There are many good people in the world, and many people in search of goodness. If Diogenes were to run around with his lamp today looking for an honest man, it might take him a while to find one. But I don't think it would take him any longer than it did in ancient Greece.

The problem is not that there is no goodness left. The problem is rather that we have been living in a culture where other values have received more attention than those we usually associate with goodness of character. Our task is to bring those values to the fore once again and to work out practical ways in which they may be cultivated. As Christians we believe that the first step in that direction is to live in close communion with the one who is the source of goodness. For goodness too is a fruit of the Spirit.