

“THE FRUITFUL LIFE”

7. Goodness

Romans 12:9-21

If you’ve read P G Wodehouse’s *Jeeves & Wooster* stories or seen any of the TV adaptations – Ian Carmichael and Dennis Price in the 1960s or Hugh Laurie and Stephen Fry more recent masterpiece – you’ll be aware that Bertie Wooster has an aunt called Agatha, who provides him with an allowance, who sends him on unwelcome errands and who is a source of constant fear and dread for young Bertie. In one of the stories, Bertie complains to Jeeves, “*It is no use telling me there are bad aunts and good aunts. At core, they are all alike. Sooner or later, out pops the cloven hoof.*” And that’s rather a shame, really, because the name Agatha is actually the Greek word for the next segment of the Fruit of the Spirit – *goodness*.

As you’ll know, if you’ve been coming along fairly regularly on Sunday mornings, we’re looking at this bunch of qualities which St Paul refers to in his *Letter to the Galatians (5:22)* as “*the Fruit of the Spirit*” – nine qualities which come as a package and should mark out the lives of those who profess to be following Jesus Christ along the way of the Holy Spirit – in complete contrast to the “*acts of the sinful nature*”, which can characterise a life lived with no thought of Jesus Christ. They’re not a menu or a checklist, but nine parts of the same whole. I was at a conference recently when someone was talking about aspects of the life of discipleship – not this specifically – but used the image of fruit. What they said in that context fits admirably with this. The fruit is not like an orange, made up of segments – which is how I’ve been referring to it – but like a peach, where all the aspects are brought together in a homogenous whole. All these nine qualities are mixed together and are inseparable and – if we are truly living this Spirit-filled life – part of the well-formed whole.

Anyway, we come this morning to the sixth of them: goodness. The actual Greek word – *agathosune* – is the noun formed from the adjective *agathos* (the feminine form of which is *Agatha*). The adjective is widely used in ancient Greek and means “good” in all kinds of contexts, not least the philosophical sense of “excellence” or “things which are in a state of well-being”. The noun, though – “goodness” – is actually only found in the Bible: it’s a word that seems to have been coined by the Christians to talk about this particular aspect of their lives. And, in English as in Greek, we find it used in all kinds of ways, so it can be difficult to put your finger on what it truly means. The poet W H Auden wrote that “*Goodness is easier to recognise than define.*” And G K Chesterton was driving at the same thing when he wrote: “*The word ‘good’ has many meanings. For example, if a man were to shoot his grandmother at a range of 500 yards, I should call him a good shot, but not necessarily a good man.*”

If you were here when we looked at the previous quality in this list, *kindness*, you may remember that we said that both these words were very closely related. Indeed, the Greek word for “*kindness*” – *chrestotes* – and *agathosune*, meaning *goodness*, are often translated interchangeably in English versions of the Bible. But there is a nuanced difference, though. They are not exactly the same. (I’ll stick to the English words now.) *Kindness* tends to be more of a disposition, an attitude, whereas *goodness* is more active. *Goodness*, we might say, is *kindness* in action, a kind of generosity (as it is translated in some versions of the Bible) which springs from kindness. Martin Luther, in his great commentary on *Galatians*, writes that *goodness* is seen “*when a man willingly helpeth others in their necessity by giving, lending or other such means.*” And it is more often than not directed towards those who we might think do not deserve it – there’s an element of grace or mercy about it, too.

But *goodness* is, like the other aspects of the Fruit of the Spirit, integral to the living out of our faith as Christians. And that *goodness* which is directed at that which does not deserve it is most clearly seen in God’s plan of salvation, when the generous sacrifice of Jesus on the cross – and his subsequent resurrection – defeated evil and overcame those forces which are trying to prevent the renewal of our relationship with God.

And that leads us to the passage we read from *Romans 12* and particularly the final sentence: “*Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good (agathos)*”. Although evil has ultimately been defeated in Jesus, it is still thrashing about, still trying to do as much damage as possible before the final reckoning when God executes his judgement for good and all. We know that Jesus has won the victory, but there’s still a lot going on which can cause us hurt and despair. So notice that Paul writes of overcoming evil here in the context of revenge – in the first part of this passage – and living as a good citizen – in the next section, the beginning of our chapter 13 (there were no chapter divisions in Paul’s original writings).

As Christians, he is saying, as people who have experienced the grace of God and whose lives have started to be transformed by that grace – people just like those Roman Christians to whom Paul first addressed these words – we are not to capitulate to the attitudes we see around us. That’s actually how he started this section of his letter at the beginning of chapter 12. Now – as then, for we are all part of fallen humanity – our culture is immersed in a kind of confrontational tribalism, especially politically at the moment. Our society seems to me to be far more divided at present than at any time in the past fifty years that I can remember. There is a horrible atmosphere of competitiveness (which has actually been encouraged by recent governments), of suspicion and cynicism, which we are all drawn into, and from which the Church is certainly not immune. So we are constantly looking to respond to things in what can often be a very vengeful way. We want to retaliate, to show them who’s boss, to emphasise how right we are and wrong everyone else is. We’ve seen that in recent elections and referenda – both in Scotland and

over Europe. Our political system and our legal system are both predicated on confrontation, on winning the argument, rather than on seeking justice or demonstrating goodness.

And once we start down that path – and we are actually a long way down it – then we are being “*overcome by evil*”. We have allowed that mind-set to dictate our actions, and our attitudes are distorted by it. As we try to fight back on their terms, as it were, far from countering evil we are simply adding to the weight of it. North Korea has a nuclear bomb: well, we can send a bigger one. Isis are shooting people: well, let’s show them what we’re made of by shooting even more. I suppose the best example in recent days has been the anti-capitalist demonstrations at the G20 summit in Hamburg where many people with an understandable and defensible beef about global capitalism tried to make their point by attacking police. As the great New Testament scholar Leon Morris puts it: “*To retaliate is to be overcome, not to win, for the enemy has succeeded in bringing us down to his level*”.

That all leads to bitterness, to stand-offs, to broken relationships. It stunts our development as human beings made in God’s image and for whom Jesus died. And that is true not just in physical or military violence, but also in the way we gossip about others, in the way we respond in words, in the way we cultivate our relationships. It’s horribly and publicly evident on social media, which gives many people something to hide behind – even a kind of assumed anonymity – as they snipe at each other, criticise each other, rail against each other through the pages of Facebook or across the polluted ether of Twitter.

Our calling, as followers of Jesus Christ, who pointed to God the Father as the supreme example of what *goodness* is all about – “*There is none good but God*” – is to demonstrate *goodness*, to model it in terms of generosity, kindness, unconditional love. In his majestic commentary on *Romans*, Tom Wright wrote these words about this verse: (I came across these words after I’d prepared the rest of this, so let me quote at length as a kind of summing up.)

“Yes, there is evil ‘out there’ in the world. But God’s people are to meet it in the way that even God met it: with love and generous goodness. The theology of the cross, in fact, can be glimpsed under this apparently detached maxim: when God came to defeat evil, this was not achieved by using an even greater evil, but by using its opposite – namely the surprising and initially counterintuitive weapons of goodness. To be consumed with vengeful thoughts, or to be led into putting such thoughts into practice, is to keep evil in circulation, whereas the way to overthrow evil, rather than perpetuating it, is to take its force and give back goodness instead.”

The second Secretary-General of the United Nations, Dag Hammarskjöld, once wrote: “*Goodness is something so simple: always live for others, never to seek one’s own advantage*”. As with so many other

things about following Jesus Christ as he walks the way of the Holy Spirit, “*simple*” does not necessarily mean easy. And as with all the other aspects of this Fruit of the Spirit which we have considered so far, we need to pray fervently to God that he will help us to demonstrate this quality in our lives. Pray for his help to rise above that judgementalism and desire for revenge that can so easily come to characterise our lives as we capitulate to the forces of evil around us. Try day by day to live out what we learn in the Bible and what we see in Jesus. Think about it. Pray about it. Then do it. As the great Roman Emperor and Stoic philosopher, Marcus Aurelius, wrote: “*Waste no more time arguing what a good man should be. Be one.*”

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The Greek word translated "*goodness*" – *agathosune* – is the noun formed from the adjective *agathos* (the feminine form of which is *Agatha*). The adjective is widely used in ancient Greek and means "good" in all kinds of contexts, not least the philosophical sense of "excellence" or "things which are in a state of well-being". The noun, though – "goodness" – is actually only found in the Bible: it's a word that seems to have been coined by the Christians to talk about this particular aspect of their lives. The Greek word for "*kindness*" – *chrestotes* – and *agathosune*, meaning *goodness*, are often translated interchangeably in English versions of the Bible. But *kindness* tends to be more of a disposition, an attitude, whereas *goodness* is more active. *Goodness*, we might say, is *kindness* in action, a kind of generosity (as it is translated in some versions of the Bible) which springs from kindness. And it is more often than not directed towards those whom we might think do not deserve it – there's an element of grace or mercy about it, too.

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And that leads us to *Romans 12:21*: "*Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good (agathos)*". Although evil has ultimately been defeated in Jesus, it is still thrashing about, still trying to do as much damage as possible before the final reckoning when God executes his judgement for good and all.

But, as people who have experienced the grace of God and whose lives have started to be transformed by that grace we are not to capitulate to the attitudes we see around us. Our culture is immersed in a kind of confrontational tribalism. We are constantly looking to respond to things in what can often be a very vengeful way. We want to retaliate, to show them who's boss, to emphasise how right we are and wrong everyone else is. And once we start down that path then we are being "*overcome by evil*". We have allowed that mind-set to dictate our actions, and our attitudes are distorted by it. As we try to fight back on their terms, as it were, far from countering evil we are simply adding to the weight of it. That all leads to bitterness, to stand-offs, to broken relationships. It stunts our development as human beings made in God's image and for whom Jesus died.

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Questions for discussion

- 1) How would you describe "*goodness*"? Can you give any examples of people you consider "good"?
- 2) Why is revenge such a common aspect of our culture? Give some examples of it. What is its effect?
- 3) How can good conquer evil? What could we do to demonstrate that?
- 4) Isn't conquering evil with good just pie-in-the-sky? Can it really be done?

5) *"Waste no more time arguing what a good man should be. Be one."* (Marcus Aurelius) So what are you going to do about this? Pray about it together.