

“The Spirit’s Fruit (Part 6): Goodness”
Psalm,65; Galatians 5:22-23; Acts 11:19-30

Are you a good-doer, or a do-gooder?

Both secular people and religious people — and every single one of *us*— are tempted to try to bear the fake fruit of goodness. We try to be do-gooders. But the Spirit of Jesus Christ has come to make us good-doers.

A do-gooder wants to be seen as better than they are, and praised for being a good person. A do-gooder is concerned with themselves.

A good-doer wants to be good by doing good. Whether anyone sees it or not is not important. A good-doer is concerned with their neighbor.

Here we have the story of Barnabas. If we want to bear the genuine fruit of goodness, to become good-doers, then we all need to be like Barnabas when we grow up.

So let’s just tell the story, and we’ll see how the Spirit's Fruit of goodness is evident along the way.

A few chapters ago, Stephen was preaching about Jesus in Jerusalem. The religious people of Jerusalem couldn’t bear his testimony, because it called their do-gooderism into question. He testified to Jesus, the good-doer, who did the good they only pretended to do. And they hated Stephen for his testimony.

They stoned him to death. Then they launched a wave of violence (19) around Jerusalem against Jesus-followers. Many of the Christians fled to nearby cities for safety.

But they didn’t stop sharing the good news that Jesus had come, just like God promised, everywhere they went. Most naturally preached to Jews. But some (20) preached also to Gentiles. To everyone’s surprise but God’s, some of these Greeks received this resurrected Jewish Messiah, Jesus and committed their lives to following him. The Apostles leading the whole Christian movement from Jerusalem heard about this. And immediately they’re concerned.

The thing with do-gooders is that they seem nice and pleasant — until their control is threatened. But not good-doers bearing the Spirit’s Fruit of goodness. The Apostles’ lives have been changed by the grace of Jesus and in view of his

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resurrection; they care only about loving their neighbor with the very love of Christ in word and deed.

So the leaders in Jerusalem pick someone to send to Antioch (22), where these Greeks have started following Jesus. Not to control them. But to hear and see what has happened, and—if it’s really happened!—to serve them. Do-gooders show up to look good and to keep control. **Good-doers show up to discern how the Spirit of God is at work, and to serve alongside the Spirit for the blessing of their neighbors.**

When I worked in construction as a college student, my boss would tease me when he sent me to do something, and I came back a little while later, unable to do what I was sent to do. He’d say “well, I sent a boy to do a man’s job.” For some reason I thought that was such a funny insult that I wasn’t even insulted.

Jerusalem didn’t send a boy to do a man’s job. A “boy” would have gone from Jerusalem to Antioch with a sense of self-importance and arrogance. “I’m the ambassador of the Central Church of Jesus Christ in Jerusalem! You better listen to me.” He would have shown up in Antioch, skeptical of Greeks since they weren’t Jews. Skeptical of residents of Antioch since they weren’t from Jerusalem, skeptical of people who hadn’t experienced persecution.

Instead, (24), Barnabas was a good man. He was full of the Holy Spirit. Full of genuine faith. He shows up in Antioch. He’s (23) sensitive to what the Spirit of God is up to. He sees what God’s grace has done in the hearts and lives of women and men as Jesus has taken up residence among them. And then he does the most Barnabas thing of all. He encourages them.

Barnabas’s *name* means “Son of Encouragement.” When you’re full of the Spirit and faith; when you’ve experienced the grace of God in Jesus for yourself; when your life has been changed by the life of God living inside your heart, then you want nothing more than to see the life of God living inside the hearts of other women and men, too. Encouragement. *That* was his concern. Not his position, control, or dignity. But the hope to see his Greek neighbors grow to bear the Spirit’s fruit as they experienced more of Christ.

And Barnabas’s encouraging presence resulted in (24) “a great number” of other Greeks whose hearts the Spirit filled with the presence and love of Jesus.

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Things are going well for Barnabas. The Apostles in Jerusalem would be *impressed!* He’d be promoted! Heck—he could become the Bishop of Antioch! The church there could be modeled after his personality, his plans, his vision. Then he’d *really* be somebody.

But that’s not who Barnabas *is*. What happens instead? He sees what the Lord is doing in Antioch. He encourages the people. His encouragement draws in new people. But at some point he realizes that for these new Greek followers of Jesus to keep growing and bearing fruit, they need another pastor. A pastor who has an intellect and maturity and experience that goes beyond what Barnabas has. So he says “hang on, here, Antiochene Christians. I’m going to go get you a *real* pastor.” And he heads off (25) to find Saul, whom we know as Paul. He brings Saul back to Antioch. And they devote themselves to this congregation for a whole year.

Now the little church of foreigners in Antioch has the best theological teacher in the world, and the most encouraging pastor in the world. All because of Barnabas’s *goodness*.

They grow, and then something remarkable happens. The people of Antioch start (27) calling them “Christians.” “Messianists.” Little Messiahs. It’s an insult. It’s like calling people do-gooders *and* religious fanatics at the same time. After a while, though, the believers say to themselves, “you know what? That’s fine. We are ‘Christians.’ We are little miniature replicas of the life of the One who was anointed not to condemn but to serve and to bless. That’s fine; you can call us that.” Because their neighbors saw their good deeds and their sincere faith, but were embarrassed by their genuineness and zeal, you and I are called Christians. Because of Barnabas, this good man who was their pastor, we are called “Christians” today.

And that fruit of goodness continues to grow when these new disciples, moved by God’s Spirit (29), gave of their own hard-earned cash and sent it to Jerusalem to help the church there, so that they could survive as the region experienced a famine. And they sent Barnabas and Saul to deliver the gift.

Think about that. You’re Peter and James and John in Jerusalem, and you’re responsible for the Christian movement. Your community has been the victims of targeted violence. Your community has mostly become refugees in surrounding cities. And a year or so later, just when a famine begins, here comes Barnabas, the

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guy you sent because of his reputation for goodness to check out these Greek converts; and here comes Saul, the guy who once was helping encourage the violence against believers and the killing of Stephen that started all of this in the first place. And they’ve got a gift from a new church of Jesus-lovers and Jesus-followers. And they’ve got stories of all that the Spirit of God has done.

If you’re Peter and James and John, you might say “my goodness! Who could have seen this coming?” And then quickly you’d realize “this is the goodness of God; the goodness of Jesus, the goodness of the Spirit, bearing a bountiful harvest of the fruit of goodness in all of these people’s lives. Not only is Jesus alive; he is alive in the lives of these women and men by the mighty power of the Spirit.”

When goodness gets in you by the Spirit, you move from kindness — “a sincere desire for the happiness of others” — to goodness — “the activity calculated to advance that goodness” (J Bridges). Your heart is soft (kindness), and now your feet are moving toward your neighbor in love (goodness).

Your goodness doesn’t have to be heroic. In fact, the New Testament teaches that the heroic goodness of Paul and Barnabas is simply a public version of what each Christian filled with the Spirit does on a small scale day in and day out.

The widows of the church, Paul told Timothy (1 Tim 5) can be given regular financial support not if they’ve done something heroic, but if they “are well known for their good deeds” in the context of their everyday community.

Many of us will practice most of our goodness without ever leaving our house or community. Paul says that we shouldn’t grow weary in doing good (Gal 6:9) even in our own household (1 Tim 5).

The great thing about goodness is that it doesn’t require a theology degree or the ability to speak in tongues. All it requires is a readiness to recognize that whether my family or my church or my neighbor needs a time-consuming word of grace and truth, or a money-consuming deed of love and mercy, the Spirit has put me in these people’s lives in order to extend the goodness of Jesus to them on his behalf. All it requires is a readiness to walk in the path of good deeds that God has prepared for us before the world was made (Eph 2:10). To put one foot in front of the other as we walk that path doing good, and to not grow weary as we walk it (Gal 6:9), even when it costs us.

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And as that path leads us through our family life, our circles of friends, our spiritual family in the church, our jobs, our surrounding community, and even to our Antiochs or Thailands and Myanmars, the fruit of goodness is borne when we are full of the Spirit and faith, ready to bless and serve others.

Wouldn’t it be great if we were *known* as “Christians”? Wouldn’t it be great if we were sometimes made fun of as being a little fanatical, a little odd, a little funny, in our surrounding community? Wouldn’t it be great if the people that thought we were a little odd, a little too “Christian,” nevertheless knew that we were so full of the fruit of goodness toward one another and toward our surrounding community that we could be called *weird*, but we could never honestly be called mere do-gooders?

The only hope that we have for becoming this kind of individual, this kind of church, is for us to go straight to the source. To the Spirit of Jesus Christ. Jesus is Savior. But he’s also known, Peter says (Acts 10:38), as a man who “went around doing good,” healing people, because God was with him.

The heroic work of salvation that saves us from our sins and their wages is done by a man, Jesus, whose *pattern of life* was “going around doing good.” For God so loved the world that he sent Jesus. And Jesus is the face of God’s goodness. He was good to people when no one was looking. When no one was going to write what he did down in a Bible. He was good to all kinds of unexpected people. Even Gentiles!

And he’s good every day to us, even to us Gentiles, today. The heroic salvation of Jesus is accomplished by pure grace and empowered by the Spirit. And that heroic work is simply the most public and miraculous instance of God’s goodness that Jesus was sent to show to us in the smallest acts of goodness in our everyday lives.

And this Jesus, whose Spirit’s fruit of goodness we’re called to bear, saves you and me and the world itself precisely so that we can go on and on, for time and for eternity, in this world and in the new world, bearing the fruit of goodness to one another until the whole creation is full of his glory revealed in simple acts of goodness forever.