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The Fruit of the Spirit: Goodness

by John W. Ritenbaugh
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Have you ever noticed the wide and sometimes even careless use we make of the word "good"? We use it so frequently that we do so almost without thinking. Yet a thing or experience you might consider good, someone else will consider only fair, poor or even bad or evil! "Good" has implications of some degree of excellence. What varies is the precise degree of excellence that lies unexpressed, hidden in the heart, when we use "good" as a sweeping generality.

It has so many uses that one dictionary, *The Reader's Digest Complete Oxford Word Finder*, devotes an entire 6" x 9½" page in very fine type to list them! We use it to indicate competence (*good at math*); reliability (*good brakes*); strength (*good eyesight*); [kindness](#) (*good of you to come*); moral excellence (*good deed or good works*); behavior (*good child*); enjoyment (*a good party*); thoroughness (*gave it a good wash*); immensity in number (*a good many people*); beneficence (*milk is good for*

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you); soundness (*a good reason*); expedience (*thought it good to have a try*); freshness (*is the meat still good*); worthiness (*good old George*); attractiveness (*has good legs*); moral rightness (*did it for your own good*); promise (*good news*); a desirable end (*sacrificing the present for future good*); favor (*a good review*).

There are many more, but this is sufficient to give us an overview of some of this very versatile word's uses in everyday English. It is used as a noun, adjective and adverb and is the root of the word "[goodness](#)." The common idea in almost all of its uses is that it suggests a desirable quality, something commendable, reliable, welcome, enjoyable, beneficent, kind, noble, admirable, propitious, exemplary and very much welcome. In the word "goodness," the inner qualities of virtue, excellence of character, morality and attitude that we see in a person's behavior come to the fore.

Agathosune

The Hebrew and Greek uses are similar but the Hebrew, like the English, has a broader application. The Greek word, *agathosune*, at first glance seems very similar to *chrestotes* ("kindness"). However, closer examination of its use in the Scriptures reveals a word indicating zealous activity in doing good. Kindness or gentleness (*chrestotes*) is more passive.

William Barclay's *Daily Study Bible* commentary on Galatians says of these two words:

It [*agathosune*] is the widest word for goodness; it is defined as "virtue equipped at every point." What is the difference? *Agathosune* might, and could, rebuke and discipline; *chrestotes* can only help. Trench says that [Jesus](#) showed *agathosune* when He cleansed the Temple and drove out those who were making it a bazaar; but He showed *chrestotes* when He was kind to the sinning woman who anointed His feet. The Christian needs that goodness which at the same time can be kind and strong. (p. 51)

Agathosune is therefore active—even aggressive—goodness. The English word "goodness" includes many pleasing qualities whereas the Greek word indicates one particular quality. It is more than an excellence of character; it is character energized, expressing itself in active good. *Agathosune* is goodness, but it does not spare sharpness and rebuke to produce good in others. Thus [God](#) can correct, sometimes very severely, and it is goodness in action. Thus parents can correct their child, and it is good because it helps produce a responsible adult.

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[Romans 15:14](#) provides a clear sense of this: "Now I myself am confident concerning you, my brethren, that you also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another." Paul links goodness with full knowledge and admonition of each other. This gives us insight into what he knew of and expected from Christians in Rome, placing before us a target to shoot for in our relationships within the fellowship of the church.

But Paul lists goodness first, as though it is either the foundation for the other two virtues or at least their necessary precursor. [I Corinthians 8:1](#) says, "Knowledge puffs up." Knowledge combined with vanity can spew a torrent of self-righteous [offense](#), but goodness will hold such a display in check and guide knowledge to build up rather than destroy.

Biblical goodness is always, under every circumstance, beneficial. Though he had not yet been to Rome at the writing of his epistle, Paul evidently understood that he was writing to an unusually strong congregation. He was so confident that they had a strong and sincere desire to do the right thing that he wrote that they were "full of goodness [and] filled with all knowledge."

This is quite a compliment, serving to reinforce what he writes in [Romans 1:8](#): "your [faith](#) is spoken of throughout the whole world"! They were far different from the recipients of Hebrews, whom he tells, "For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the [oracles of God](#)" ([Hebrews 5:12](#)).

The Romans' full knowledge was an intelligent and comprehensive understanding of the faith and Christian responsibility. Strong faith is not built on weak understanding. They had given honest, serious thought to applying their faith to the sometimes bewildering tangle of life in this world. They were living it.

These two qualities—goodness and knowledge combined—presents a sound vehicle for instructing each other on the best ways to "walk the walk" despite the pulls of this world. Goodness provides the right disposition and motivation, and knowledge, the correct instruction. One devoid of the necessary knowledge cannot teach; anyone destitute of goodness will not even try because he lacks the impulse to help others in the right spirit. Even if he makes the effort, only a spirit marked by active love will win the response without which no true education in God's way is possible.

The word translated "admonish" in [Romans 15:14](#) is rendered "advice," "counsel" and "instruct" in other translations. In [I Thessalonians 5:14](#), the same word is translated "warn," indicating that it is more than mere instruction. The English word that comes closest to expressing the sense best is "inculcate." *Inculcate* means "to impress upon the mind by frequent repetition or persistent urging" (*Webster's New World Dictionary*). Among its synonyms are such strong words as "indoctrinate," "brainwash," "admonish repeatedly" and even "hammer"! No wonder William Barclay says that *agathosune* is goodness that "might, and could, rebuke and discipline."



This goodness does whatever loving wisdom calls for in a given situation. However, this in no way means that one should deliver the admonishment, counsel or even rebuke with meanness of spirit. In other words, one with goodness does not viciously "chew somebody out." Numerous scriptures counsel us to be gentle and tender with each other. Paul is himself a model of tact and diplomacy in dealing with difficult circumstances within congregations and between himself and a person or congregation.

Tob, Tub and Hesed

Tob, tub and *hesed* are three Hebrew words translated into the English "good" or "goodness" and many other words besides those two.

Hesed, as shown in the article on kindness ([Forerunner](#), July 1998), is usually translated "mercy," "love," "lovingkindness," "grace," "loyalty" or "devotion." Each of these expresses some of God's goodness, and so twelve times in the King James Version the translators opted to use "goodness" as most closely expressing the contextual meaning of *hesed*. [Exodus 34:6](#) is an outstanding example: "And the Lord passed before him and proclaimed, 'The Lord, the Lord God, [merciful](#) and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in *goodness* and truth.'" A second appears in [Psalm 52:1](#) where David writes, "Why do you boast in evil, O mighty man? The goodness of God endures continually."

Tob and *tub* both derive from the same root that means "to be or make good, better or well." *Tob* is used as both an adjective and noun and is translated very broadly as good, good thing, beautiful, best, better, bountiful, cheerful, correct, delightful, fair, favor, fine, glad, gracious, joyful, kindly, prosperity, precious, pleasant and merry. All of these are things we would agree are normally good. Again, the context determines which usage the translators choose.

Tub is a noun and is frequently translated "goodness," but according to the *Theological Wordbook of the [Old Testament](#)*, "The same categories of meaning are found as for the adjective (*tob*) except for the technical philosophical usage" (vol. 1, p. 346). *Tub* is used to indicate material things taken to secure a bride for [Isaac](#) ([Genesis 24:10](#)). It indicates [joy](#) in [Deuteronomy 28:47](#) and esthetic beauty in [Hosea 10:11](#). In [Psalm 119:66-68](#) it seems to refer to correctness, and in [Psalm 145:7](#) to God's moral goodness. From these examples we can see it is not difficult to determine that either word seems correct in a given situation. We should not place too much emphasis on their specific use.

Can Man Be Good?

In terms of ethics and morality, there is perhaps no more striking proof that most men are bad than the notions men have of what is good. In common speech "good" has been degraded to mean little more than amiability, and is applied with little discrimination to character. What one may call a "good fellow" may in fact be a very sinful person.



"Good" is carelessly applied to charming and physically attractive people in entertainment, politics, and athletics merely because of their professional skill or their ability to elicit a sense of encouragement or admiration, though their character may be exceedingly immoral. God says in [Proverbs 31:30](#), "Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord, she shall be praised." If we want to be more biblically correct, we need to learn more about what the Bible means by "goodness."

Commonly, "good" connotes merely more or less admirable motives and deeds, and its use is often no more than unthinking politeness. This is very likely what Christ discerned in the rich young ruler's address to Him in [Matthew 19:16](#): "Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?" Jesus' answer to him made him—and should make us—ask ourselves why we call very ordinary men and actions "good."

The scriptural concept is immensely deeper and its use much more restricted. This fruit of God's Spirit is more inward, touching on every thought, word and action of the godly person. This demands that motives be right before we call any action good. This means our central and all-influencing motive is loving God and regarding His will in all things. It means that the "good man" is one in whom righteousness (right doing) flows from inward devotion and love toward God.

From these two elements, love toward God and goodness, godly character is formed. True goodness is inseparable from godliness. Godliness is goodness' source and foundation and the sole condition on which goodness is possible. From this, however, it follows that a man may be truly called "good" and at the same time not be perfect. A good person may have failures. It is the direction of such a person's desires, his motivations, that gradually determines his character, not necessarily the degree of perfection he has achieved.

Was not David "a man after God's own heart" despite having a number of serious failures during his life? Those sins were certainly contrary to the very determined direction of his life because he repented of his failures in humility and tears (Psalm 51) and resumed pressing "toward the goal for the prize" of his high calling ([Philippians 3:14](#)).

Peter also exhibited the same determination in the direction of his life by rising first from the humiliating debasement of his three-fold denial of Christ and later from his rebuke by Paul to offer himself in selfless, sacrificial devotion to God and the brethren.

These and many others were truly good men in the Christian sense because they did what Jesus taught the rich young ruler in answer to his question, "[W]hat good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?" These men kept God's commandments by the power of His Spirit and thus with the correct motivation. In the absolute sense, however, only God is good. "So He said to him, 'Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God. But if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments'" ([Matthew 19:17](#)).

God's Goodness



God describes Himself as "abounding in goodness" ([Exodus 34:6](#)). God is the Source of all that can truly be called good. He does not just have it or do it, He abounds in it and greatly desires to give it to man. We might better understand how abundant by comparing this second revelation of God's name to [Moses](#) with the first which occurred at the burning bush.

This second revelation occurs within the context of Israel's very grave [sin](#) with the Golden Calf and God's subsequent and justified anger (Exodus 32). Three thousand people die as God executes His wrath through the Levites (verses 25-28). Moses intercedes before God for Israel's sin (verses 31-34), but His anger is not completely placated because an unspecified plague continues (verse 35). Although God states He would nonetheless bring Israel into the land ([Exodus 33:1-5](#)), Moses desires more reassurance that God would carry through (verses 12-23). He asks to see God's glory (verse 18). God replies that He would make His goodness pass before Him (verse 19). When He does this, He gives Moses what amounts to a sermon on His names, emphasizing, in the light of the Golden Calf incident, His abundant goodness expressed in mercy, graciousness, [patience](#), forgiveness and justice.

Exodus 3 records the first revelation:

And the Angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire from the midst of a bush. So he looked, and behold, the bush burned with fire, but the bush was not consumed. . . . So when the Lord saw that he turned aside to look, God called to him from the midst of the bush and said, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." . . . Then Moses said to God, "Indeed, when I come to the children of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they say to me, 'What is His name?' what shall I say to them?" And God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." And He said, 'Thus shall you say to the children of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" ([Exodus 3:2, 4, 13-14](#))

The name I AM essentially means "the Self-existent One," or as the Moffatt translation has it, "the Eternal." It is He, the high and lofty One who inhabits eternity, having neither beginning of days nor end of life. He who upholds the universe with His Word and is an inexhaustible source of power. It is that very concept of the inexhaustibility of God's nature that comes out so wondrously and beautifully in His manifestation of Himself at the burning bush.

God in His being is absolute, dependent on no one or thing. He is infinite and eternal. He is not "burned out" by life and has no proclivity towards death. He is unwearied by work; He can operate eternally and still be unspent. We can take great encouragement in this because He is this way, not only in His labors and length of life, but as [Exodus 34:1-7](#) shows, in attributes such as mercy, graciousness, patience, forgiveness and justice. He is abundant—abounding, rich, plenteous, ever constant—in goodness!

God's inexhaustible goodness ought to be self-evident from the creation and a cursory understanding of human history. God's providence has been supplying unending resources for life for 6,000 tumultuous years



of human history. These come as air, water, food, housing and reproduction and all the uses man's creative mind and energetic workmanship put them to. Even our minds and workmanship are products of God's goodness! In spite of our stiff-necked and rebellious conduct, He has continued to bear patiently with us, forgive us, supply us with life and knowledge and move us forward with His purpose.

The Source of All Goodness

In the Bible the most profound and absolute sense of "good" is predicated on God alone. Thus, though "good" is used freely in many circumstances; though there are good and bad individuals ([Matthew 5:45](#)); though it is possible for Christians to do good works ([Ephesians 2:10](#)); though everything created by God is good ([I Timothy 4:4](#)); and though God Himself judged and pronounced the creation "very good" ([Genesis 1:31](#)), Jesus declares that God alone is good ([Mark 10:18](#)).

Only God's goodness is absolute. All others have degrees of goodness as measured against this absolute standard. Therefore God is the Source of all goodness. If men cannot do good, it renders as meaningless all the exhortations of the prophets for the people to do good ([Amos 5:14](#); [Isaiah 1:17](#)). If human beings cannot do good, then all the moral injunctions throughout the Bible are also meaningless, and we must view the Bible, with its promises of blessings accompanying good deeds, as deceptive.

Moses writes in [Deuteronomy 6:18](#), 24:

And you shall do what is right and good in the sight of the Lord, that it may be well with you, and that you may go in and possess the good land of which the Lord swore to your fathers. . . .
And the Lord commanded us to observe all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God, for our good always, that He might preserve us alive, as it is this day.

He adds in [Deuteronomy 12:28](#), "Observe and obey all these words which I command you, that it may go well with you and your children after you forever, when you do what is good and right in the sight of the Lord your God."

God's dealings with His people are good because they are the revelation and expression of His goodness, and from these things we learn to be and do good. Jacob recalls God's own words in a prayer recorded in [Genesis 32:12](#): "For you said, 'I will surely treat you well [*good*, KJV], and make your descendants as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.'"

God's deliverance of His people from Egypt and His continued preservation of them caused Jethro, Moses father-in-law, to rejoice: "Then Jethro rejoiced for all the good which the Lord had done for Israel, whom He had delivered out of the hand of the Egyptians" ([Exodus 18:9](#)).

A number of scriptures call God's law good:



- » [Nehemiah 9:13](#): You came down also on Mount Sinai, and spoke with them from heaven, and gave them just ordinances and true laws, good statutes and commandments.
- » [Psalm 119:39](#): Turn away my reproach which I dread, for Your judgments are good.
- » [Romans 7:7](#), 12: What shall we say then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! On the contrary, I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known [covetousness](#) unless the law had said, 'You shall not covet.' . . . Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good.

The good [law of God](#), the law that has its source in God, most clearly teaches us the foundation of moral and ethical conduct.

Since God is clearly the Source of good, how can a man begin to become good as God is? Jesus briefly addresses this question in the [Sermon on the Mount](#):

Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. Or what man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him! Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets. ([Matthew 7:7-12](#))

Ask, seek and knock, and God will give good gifts! Could we request anything better of Him than His Spirit? [Nehemiah 9:20](#) declares, "You [God] also gave Your good Spirit to instruct them, and did not withhold Your manna from their mouth, and gave them water for their thirst." God has already set a precedence for giving His Spirit. [Psalm 143:10](#) adds, "Teach me to do your will, for You are my God; Your Spirit is good. Lead me in the land of uprightness." Jesus says God will give us good things, and this verse shows God's Spirit is good.

[Ephesians 5:8-10](#) carries these thoughts another step further. "For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the [fruit of the Spirit](#) is in all goodness, righteousness and truth), proving what is acceptable to the Lord." [Galatians 5:22-23](#) puts the capstone on this process in that it names distinct fruits or products of the good Spirit of God working in us. God is surely the Source of these things because they are not produced in carnal man except as pale shadows of the reality.

God's Goodness in the Christian



[Ephesians 5:8](#) says that converted persons are "light in the Lord" and should "walk as children of light." This light is revealed in all goodness, righteousness and truth. This is what others should witness in us and be guided by as an example. Each of these three terms covers a different aspect of our witness.

Righteousness conveys legality. [Psalm 119:172](#) defines righteousness as keeping the commandments of God, thus righteousness implies conformity to law. It is a narrower term than either truth or goodness. It indicates uprightness and a manifestation of justice. It can literally mean being right. God uses the illustration of a [plumb line](#) in Amos to portray what He means by righteousness. The person who is righteous has been measured against the standard of God's law and found to be in alignment. Therefore, righteousness should be a characteristic of a Christian. He is fair and just in his dealings with others, plays life by the rules and respects others' rights and possessions.

Earlier, in [Ephesians 5:6](#), Paul speaks of deceit, things done in secret and the hidden things of darkness. "All truth" is their opposite. The character of the life of the Christian is without deceit. Nothing is hidden, underhanded or dishonest; nothing smacks of hypocrisy or pretense. The life of those walking in the light will be open, aboveboard and transparent; it has nothing to conceal and never pretends to be something it is not.

As mentioned earlier, New Testament goodness, *agathosune*, is a versatile and strong word that can be used either of the act or the intention motivating the act. It can be gentle or sharp, but the intention of the good person is always the well-being of the recipients of his goodness. An English word that covers some aspects of the Greek word is "benevolence." This "inclination to do good" seems to be Paul's intent in [Ephesians 5:9](#).

Martyn Lloyd-Jones, in his *Darkness and Light*, a commentary on Ephesians 4:17-5:17, writes that this goodness is "indicative of a perfect balance in the various parts of the personality. A good man is a balanced man, a man in whom everything that is noble and excellent works harmoniously together" (p. 402). Thus he can be gentle or sharp, but what he does always has the right balance and is good.

Such a person tries to promote the happiness of all around him. He is not selfish or self-centered, but because he has this balance himself, he desires that others have it too. This is how God is. God looks upon us in our misery, the result of sin, and in His goodness leads us to [repentance](#). Sometimes the path to repentance for us is sharp and painful, but it is always good.

On the more gentle side, God "makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust" ([Matthew 5:45](#)). Although men are evil, He does this kindness out of His goodness.

In the converted person we see a pale reflection of this goodness. The good man is one who thinks about love, beauty and truth—not just in the realm of majestic mountains, surging seas, gorgeous flowers and sunsets, but more specifically in his fellow man. He wants to alleviate suffering and to mitigate wrongs. He consciously looks for ways to benefit others. Because he is not out to gratify himself, His works are the



opposite of the self-centered works of darkness. The good person is the benefactor of the weak, helpless and those in trouble—and sometimes even of the evil.

In the presence of Cornelius and his family, Peter says of Jesus, "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him" ([Acts 10:38](#)). The Scriptures speak frequently of Jesus' healing all who came to Him without qualification as to who they were. He sharply rebuked those who had the power to do good but did not. Though He at times ate with the "respectable" of the cities and villages, He was known to keep company with publicans and sinners. He flatly states that He did not come for those who were well, but for those who needed a physician ([Matthew 9:12-13](#)). As a man Jesus continued to follow the same pattern He established as God above, and in so doing He gave us a perfect example to follow within our contacts and power.

Joseph's Example

Sometimes we find it difficult to relate to the level of conduct Jesus displayed in His life. We justify our behavior on the basis that He was God in the flesh, but when we turn the searchlight of God's Word elsewhere, we find mere humans setting very high standards of goodness under trying circumstances. One such person was Joseph.

Joseph was wonderfully gifted and very righteous, but he was sold into slavery in Egypt by his jealous brothers. He overcame this through diligent and effective service to his master, yet he was arrogantly thrown into prison on trumped up charges. He lost his master's confidence and his career appeared to be ruined by the combination of his goodness and the hatred of a wicked woman.

"What a fool!" [the world](#) says, and doubters might comment that this is proof that God does not care because virtue should be rewarded. But to Joseph it was better to have a clean conscience and be clear before God in prison than to do wickedness and sit at a rich man's table. Sometimes we make judgments too hastily, before an issue is resolved.

Joseph could have become bitter, but [Genesis 39:21](#) says, "But the Lord was with Joseph and showed him mercy, and He gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison." God did not abandon Joseph because he was in prison, and Joseph did not abandon God nor cease doing good in his humiliating circumstance. He diligently served his captors and his fellow inmates. It was Joseph who noticed and inquired of the sadness masking the faces of the baker and butler ([Genesis 40:6-7](#)). His mind was not on himself but on the good of others. His is a wonderful example of what godly goodness produces.

The Lord is with us too, regardless of our circumstances, and the same Spirit that was in Joseph, Jesus and God Almighty in heaven is in us. How many times have we had an impulse to do some good and stifled it by



giving ourselves some "good" reason why we should not? "Do not quench the Spirit," Paul writes in [I Thessalonians 5:19](#), but "stir up the gift of God" to even greater intensity ([II Timothy 1:6](#)).

Goodness is something we must devote ourselves to. We must cultivate it because, coming out of this present evil world, we have not been schooled in doing good. It is not part of our character. We have been schooled in being self-centered, and self-centered people cannot do godly good.

The earth is full of the goodness of the Lord because our Father is good ([Psalm 33:5](#)). He is creating us in His image and drawing out of us His own goodness to witness that He is our God and to make us ready for His Kingdom. He has given gifts to all of His children to serve Him and His church. We need to take every opportunity to yield to His Spirit for this purpose and labor to develop the goodness that is its fruit.

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