

FIVE FORKS BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH

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Series: Some Fruit, More Fruit Much Fruit

SERMON: Soften the Harshness

(Credit Tom VanAntwerp)

Introduction

Good morning. So glad to be with you, and those joining us online – Welcome.

There is a radio station that has a project called **Story Corp**. They invite people to come in off the street and record stories from their lives. One story they captured was of a man named Julio Diaz. Julio's a thirty-one-year-old social worker from the Bronx. Every night he has a regular evening routine. He ends his hour-long commute back from the city to his apartment, one stop early: - so he can get off and go to a diner.

This diner's become his home dinner spot. One night, Diaz stepped off the Number 6 train onto a nearly empty platform, and his evening took an unexpected turn. As he walked towards the stairs, a teenage boy approached him, pulled out a knife and demanded his wallet. Julio gives the boy his wallet and says, "Here you go."

As the boy hurries off, Julio calls out, "Hey, wait a minute. You forgot something. If you're going to be robbing people for the rest of the night, you might as well take my coat to keep you warm. All I wanted to do was go get dinner. If you want to join me, hey, you're more than welcome."

The stunned boy accepts Julio's offer, so they go to the diner Julio frequents. Once seated, the manager, then the servers, and even the kitchen staff all come by to say hi to Julio, and the boy is again surprised. He says, "Man, you know everybody here. You're even nice to the dishwasher ... I didn't think people actually behaved that way."

Julio asks the boy, "What is it that you want out of life?" The boy sits there not knowing what to say.

When the bill comes, Julio says, "Look, I guess you're going to have to pay for this bill, because you got my money So, if you give me my wallet back, I'll gladly treat you." The boy hands the wallet back. Julio takes a twenty out and gives it to the boy, asking the boy for his knife in return, to which the boy complies.

Julio related, "I figure if you treat people right, you can only hope that they treat you right. It's as simple as it gets in this complicated world."

Today we continue our series: **Some Fruit, More Fruit, Much Fruit**, that we have been doing on Sundays scattered throughout the year. Our theme for 2023 is from **Colossians – Becoming Fully Mature in Christ**. One characteristic of a maturing plant is how each succeeding season, it produces more and better fruit. We have connected this concept with Paul's words to the believers in Galatia, where he says:

Galatians 5:22-23 Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

It is these nine 'kinds of fruit' that we have been focusing on each Sunday in the series. Several weeks ago, Pastor Bill talked to us about **Kindness**.

Today we are going to talk about **Goodness**. Goodness, as Paul uses it here, is so closely related to Kindness, that at times the two seem to overlap – and it may be difficult to separate them. So, allow your mind to move freely back and forth between goodness and kindness as we talk. 1st we should ask:

What is Goodness? As Paul uses it.

I must point out that, depending on the version of the bible you use, the English words good or goodness show up over 850 times – but they translate numbers of different Hebrew and Greek words. Sometimes the words refer to being beautiful or helpful or useful. Often, we have thought this word refers to: **“moral excellence”**. That is, behavior that is right and approved by God. Behavior that God says is right. For example, When Peter encourages us to: **“add to our faith, Goodness...”** he is referring to “moral excellence.” We might say “being well behaved.” And that certainly should be characteristic of all Jesus followers.

I remember as a boy, living in Zambia, Africa, 10 years old, and I was baptized in a river on a cold windy day, about a mile from where we were staying. As I made the trek home, soaking wet, freezing cold, barefooted, walking on that stony path back to the house, I stubbed my toe and it started bleeding profusely. I remember that very clearly. But something else I remember just as clearly, was thinking to myself, “Well, now that I have been baptized, I’m going to have to be a good boy - behave better.” Is this what Paul was referring to? No.

Paul, when referring to the fruit of the Spirit, **“goodness”**, was actually referring to something that it is better understood as **“generosity.”**

Let me unpack it a little more for us. Paul uses this word, ‘goodness’ in verse 22. He uses it as the opposite to something he mentioned in verses 20 and 21.

In verses 20 and 21, Paul presents a list of characteristics he calls “acts of the sinful nature.” This is behaviors and attitudes that are unbecoming of Jesus followers. Two of these characteristics are pertinent to our discussion today. They are, **jealousy** in verse 20 and **envyings** in verse 21.

Jealousy in a person is something that stirs up **resentment** in that person, **when another person enjoys success** that is denied to the first person.

Your coworker gets the promotion you were hoping for. If you have jealousy in your heart, you will resent the success of your coworker. This is selfish jealousy – you want the good thing for yourself and feel bad when someone else gets it.

Then Paul mentions envyings in verse 21. This is similar to jealousy. Envy is **a grudging spirit that cannot bear to think about someone else’s prosperity.**

Maybe you hear that a friend received a nice inheritance from their grandmother and they can practically pay off their car or mortgage. Man, they are set financially. You don’t have any wealthy relatives. If you did, they would leave the money to someone else. You might smile when your friend told you about their good fortune, but inside, it’s a grudging spirit that can hardly stand to think about it.

Now Paul mentions 'goodness' verse 22. Which we have said may be better understood as generosity – and as the opposite of jealousy and envy. This type of goodness is, 'treating people, and having an attitude in your heart towards others,' that is the same as the way God is towards each one of us.

So, this **Goodness is a spirit that always works for the good of the other person.** Many times, at the costly expense to yourself. And as a result, this **Goodness** in some little way, at least for a while, **Softens the Harshness** in the other person's world.

When I hear Julio's story, I think he was tapping into the power of kindness and goodness. His was a generous response to a harsh attack, that softened the whole situation.

Goodness chooses to believe that something can be gained when we respond to the harsh world, not with greater harshness, but with generosity.

When one person heard Julio's story, she responded with a legitimate question. She said, "I wonder what happened to this kid after this encounter. Did it really change his life?"

As another person observed, the story is not just about that kid. The story is also about Julio. Here is this young social worker, living in a city of twenty million people, could walk into a nondescript diner at the end of the day and be welcomed like he owns the place— welcomed by the manager and the wait staff and the dishwasher. This story is about the very practical effect of goodness – a fruit of Holy Spirit – on the world in which we live.

People who treat others with goodness (and kindness) not only soften the harshness of the world of those around them, but they also find their own world becoming a more beautiful place.

Goodness – makes it better for everyone. This is how God works in the world.

God Works for Our Good

The bible abounds with stories about God's goodness, God's generosity to people as they make their way through life.

The story of humanity begins with God placing his humans in a utopian garden. He generously supplies them with everything they need.

We read about how God gave Abraham a land 'flowing with milk and honey.' This is an expression of plenty, prosperity, goodness. God gave Abraham descendants, 'as numerous as the stars in the sky.' Again, an expression of God's goodness and generosity just being poured out on Abraham, like pouring a refreshing bucket of water over someone on a hot summer day.

This is how God works.

But to help us understand this goodness, I would like to take us to a story Jesus told to illustrate how God is good towards people. In the story the landowner represents God. The workers are you and me.

Matthew 20.

"For the Kingdom of Heaven is like the landowner who went out early one morning to hire workers for his vineyard. ² He agreed to pay the normal daily wage and sent them out to work.

³ "At nine o'clock in the morning he was passing through the marketplace and saw some people standing around doing nothing. ⁴ So he hired them, telling them he would pay them whatever was right at the end of the day. ⁵ So they went to work in the vineyard. At noon and again at three o'clock he did the same thing.

⁶ "At five o'clock that afternoon he was in town again and saw some more people standing around. He asked them, 'Why haven't you been working today?'

⁷ "They replied, 'Because no one hired us.'

"The landowner told them, 'Then go out and join the others in my vineyard.'

⁸ "That evening he told the foreman to call the workers in and pay them, beginning with the last workers first. ⁹ When those hired at five o'clock were paid, each received a full day's wage. ¹⁰ When those hired first came to get their pay, they assumed they would receive more. But they, too, were paid a day's wage. ¹¹ When they received

their pay, they protested to the owner, ¹² ‘Those people worked only one hour, and yet you’ve paid them just as much as you paid us who worked all day in the scorching heat.’ How do you feel right now about this story? Be honest with yourself. Unfair?

¹³ “The landlord answered one of them, ‘Friend, I haven’t been unfair! Didn’t you agree to work all day for the usual wage? ¹⁴ Take your money and go. I wanted to pay this last worker the same as you. ¹⁵ Is it against the law for me to do what I want with my money? Should you be jealous because I am generous to others?’

Notice these two words Jesus uses at the end of the story. The workers are **jealous**. Same word Paul used to describe the sinful nature in Galatians. The landowner, on the other hand, is good or **generous** to the workers who did not really deserve such generosity. Again. The same word that Paul uses as a ‘fruit of the Spirit.’

Also notice how the Landlord’s action towards all the workers, and particularly those who began working later in the day, made those workers’ world, less harsh. They had been facing a day with no income to buy food to feed their families. Probably they would have gone home to a hungry wife and children. The landlord’s generosity softened their world that day.

When Paul uses this word as a “Fruit of the Spirit,” that we should see increasing in the lives of the believers, it is because this is how God acts towards us. We should be looking out for the good of others, to soften the harshness in their world, and it is a natural result of someone becoming fully mature in Christ.

Let’s consider how:

Jesus Works for Our Good

I want to take us to a story in Marks Gospel chapter 7.

³¹ **Jesus left Tyre and went up to Sidon** ³² **A deaf man with a speech impediment was brought to him, and the people begged Jesus to lay his hands on the man to heal him.**

³³ **Jesus led him away from the crowd so they could be alone. He put his fingers**

into the man's ears. Then, spitting on his own fingers, he touched the man's tongue. ³⁴ Looking up to heaven, he sighed and said, "Ephphatha," which means, "Be opened!" ³⁵ Instantly the man could hear perfectly, and his tongue was freed so he could speak plainly!

³⁷ The [crowd] was completely amazed and said again and again, "Everything he does is wonderful. He even makes the deaf to hear and gives speech to those who cannot speak."

The **first** thing I want to point out is that Jesus' **goodness is expressed person to person**. When Jesus was asked to heal this man, he was asked by a crowd of people. Did you notice how he responds and to whom he responds?

He doesn't respond to the crowd; he responds to the man. He engages him person to person. It's very intimate, Jesus sees this man as an individual. Jesus makes it clear to the man that this moment is for him. Goodness often flows from person to person.

The **second** thing I want to point out is that even **Jesus demonstrates that God is the source of goodness**. Did you notice that Jesus looked up to heaven? That simple upward look was an acknowledgement by Jesus to the man, and to us as we read it now, that every good thing comes from the Father. When we are good to others, it is the fruit of God's Spirit in us – it is not our own doing.

A **third** thing I want to point out from this encounter is something we've already said—that **goodness and kindness have the power to change our world**. Verse 35: "**At this, the man's ears were opened. His tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly.**" The action of Jesus changed this man's world. In an instant his world became softer. That's the result of the genuine goodness that comes from God.

I received a call a few weeks ago asking if people from Five Forks Church could help stack wood for a gentleman, who is now on dialysis and is no longer able to stack his own wood. I said yes.

And then the caller asked if I knew how she came to think of calling Five Forks Church. I had no idea. So, she continued. "About 5 years ago she was in Walmart and two teenage girls

walked up to her, handed her an envelope and said they wanted to share some of God's goodness with her. When she opened the envelope, it was a \$50 gift card and a note, "from the Five Forks Youth Group." She continued – "I never forgot that and when I thought about whom I might ask to help my client, I thought of Five Forks Church."

Goodness often flows person to person to person. Always empowered by Holy Spirit, and it literally changes people's worlds for the better.

So, I would like to consider several ways that we, people filled with God's Spirit, can express God's pattern of goodness. How can we express:

Maturing in Goodness

The first way I will mention, I am sure you are expecting. Expressing God's goodness in us through our **generosity in giving financially.**

Let me start with something small but very influential. Whenever you eat out, do you tip the waiting staff? Or if you get your food delivered, do you tip the driver? If so, how do you decide how much to tip? I know many people do a simple math calculation using a percentage and then round up to the nearest dollar and feel really good about their generosity.

We were talking about this recently and someone commented about her friend who used to give extravagantly generous tips. (Her friend has since passed away.) She said her friend did that, because "She had done waitressing and knew how hard of a job that was." She knew the big tip would soften the harshness in that worker's day. So, she tipped big all the time – not just occasionally. Goodness, even in a relatively small way, done person to person, is evidence of maturing in Christ.

This next avenue of expressing goodness is hard for me to say. First of all because I am one of the recipients of this goodness. And second, because I do not want to be known as a preacher always asking for your money. In fact, the staff wrestled with this in our sermon meeting for over 20 minutes. Do I bring it up or not? All right I will.

I have said many times how I appreciate the financial generosity of the people at Five Forks. And I mean that from the bottom of my heart. You have responded so often, so generously, when we have asked for donations for various needs that we have become aware of. Bibles and a tractor for Mozambique. Supplying Chrome Books for the students in school. Sending our students on missions trips. And I know many of you give generously to many causes and needs. Thank you, Thank you, Thank you. Please keep doing that.

But may I suggest that the General Operating Fund of the Church is another area that could benefit from more generosity? The General Operating Fund covers most of the regular spending we do as a church. Unfortunately, it also includes my salary and the salaries of the other staff – and I want you to know that I feel like I am paid very well. So, it is hard to mention the church as a place to express your increasing generosity.

When people ask us why we don't talk much about giving, they often ask if people even know they can put their contributions in the boxes at the back of the auditorium, since we don't even pass an offering plate any more. Now you know. You can mail your contributions to the church. You can also give online. You can even 'text to give.'

Let me say, we believe the Lord will provide the funds we need to do the ministry God wants us to do in our church, in our community and even around the world. God will use our generosity for the good of others.

There, I said it. Let me move on. Another place we can mature in goodness is with our:

Generosity of Time and Attention

This is another area where I confess that I brag to others about how many volunteers give so many hours of time to help the ministries of Five Forks. Be it in children's ministry, Student Ministry, Worship ministry and in our many outreach ministries. Many of you give many, many hours, and use your talents to serve God by serving others. Thank you. Your generosity in this area thrills me.

But still we get requests for more help, more volunteers are needed. What should we

do? We need people to help pick up food donations from area businesses, for the Food Pantry. We need people to help in the Clothes Closet. Pastor Chris has a continual request for help in the Children's Ministry. It takes time. Are you able to give more time?

How about our attention. Pastor Shaun spoke to us two weeks ago about a phone ministry in the UK where people donate their time just to listen attentively to lonely people on the phone. Could we do something like that in our community – pay attention to the lonely?

Why would we do it? Not because someone else does it, but because there is a growing sense in our spirits, as we mature in Christ, that God can use us to work for the good of others. And as we learned from the story of Jesus healing a deaf man, goodness often flows person to person.

There is also the goodness of our **words**. Is Holy Spirit urging you to greater

Generosity of Compliments and Words of Appreciation

The apostle Paul urges:

[Ephesians 4:29](#) Let everything you say be good and helpful, so that your words will be an encouragement to those who hear them.

In a world where so many are quick to criticize, complain, ridicule and even shame people with words, those who are maturing in Christ will say more words that build up and encourage.

I challenge you to make a goal of offering compliments and words of affirmation and appreciation to at least three people every day. Most importantly to the people closest to you. Let that type of speech become characteristic of who you are as you mature in Christ.

I want to mention one more area of life where a generous amount of goodness is desperately needed. I am referring to:

Generosity of Forgiveness

Let me take us to one more story, this time in Genesis.

Many of us are familiar with the story of Joseph. He was the favorite son of his father. And in one of his father's not so good parenting moments, he showed explicitly that Joseph was favored.

Of course, this made his brothers jealous. Is that word familiar to you today? These jealous brothers sold Joseph as a slave into Egypt. Jacob, the father, was devastated. Let me cut to the chase. Circumstances happened in Joseph's life that he became the second highest ruler in the land of Egypt, very powerful.

Circumstances happened in the brothers' lives that resulted in them going to Egypt and having to cower for mercy before Joseph. Things progress and Joseph and his father are happily reunited and then Jacob, the father, dies. Picking up in [Genesis 50:14](#)

After burying Jacob, Joseph returned to Egypt with his brothers. ¹⁵ But now that their father was dead, Joseph's brothers became fearful. "Now Joseph will show his anger and pay us back for all the wrong we did to him," they said.

Hearts accustomed to jealousy and envy will be hearts that are fearful, unforgiving and vengeful. They will be self-protective, self-promoting and self-preserving. Rather than being hearts that sacrifice for the good of others. This was apparently still the brothers' hearts. The brothers assumed this would be the heart in Joseph.

¹⁶ So they sent this message to Joseph: "Before your father died, he instructed us ¹⁷ to say to you: 'Please forgive your brothers for the great wrong they did to you—for their sin in treating you so cruelly.' So we, the servants of the God of your father, beg you to forgive our sin."

And then they crossed their fingers, cringed and waited.

But look what has been growing in Joseph's heart – the goodness of God's Spirit.

When Joseph received the message, he broke down and wept.

¹⁹ Joseph replied, "Don't be afraid of me. Am I God, that I can punish you? ²⁰ You

intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good. He brought me to this position so I could save the lives of many people. ²¹ No, don't be afraid. I will continue to take care of you and your children." So he reassured them by speaking kindly to them.

As Joseph looked back on his life, he did not focus primarily on the wrongs done to him by so many. Rather, he saw the good hand of God touching him, changing him, growing him into a person who could readily offer the same generous goodness of forgiveness to those who had wronged him. Joseph shows us how to express much goodness, through the power of Holy Spirit living in us.

Conclusion

Perhaps you need a little goodness and kindness in your life, not necessarily expressed by somebody else. But rather, welling up from within **you** and being expressed to others by **you**.

Remember the story of Julio, how when he walked into the diner – the place and the people just lit up.

Is there someplace in your world, where, when you walk in – the place lights up. Does your presence and do your words and actions make that place softer for everyone, less harsh? Do the kids say, "Yay, mom's home." Or is it more of a "Oh, no. Here he come's."

Are your coworkers glad to see you every day. And somewhat discouraged when you go on vacation, because you are the conduit through which flows an endless supply of God's goodness?

God wants you to be the instrument that softens the harshness in somebody's world today, tomorrow, in fact every day. God will enable you to be that person by growing the Fruit of Holy Spirit in you.

PRAY

God,

Thank You for showing us what generosity looks like. I confess that at times it's easy for me to focus on things that don't matter. But today, I surrender to Your will, trusting in You completely. Change the way I think, and give me a generous heart. Make me aware of the resources I have, and how I can use them to serve others. Help me to live a life that blesses others just as You have richly blessed me.

In Jesus' name,

Amen.