

The Magnificent Story: GOODNESS

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Romans 15:14

We cover chapter 5 this week in “The Magnificent Story.” God is not only GREAT, but God is also good. Being great and being good are not always linked. We can think of people who have been great in some capacity but were not good people. The word “good” appears SIX TIMES in Genesis 1. And “VERY GOOD” appears only after God has created a human being. God is all about goodness. That is the nature of God. The Trinity is beautiful in relationship. God’s goodness is so much greater than our ability to understand the godhead. And yet, we are invited into a relationship with Him. 1 Corinthians 2:9-10 can be misquoted. It begins with *“What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him”* but we must keep on reading the rest of the text: *“these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God.”* Not only that, but the Lord gives us His goodness. And His goodness comes through the magnificent story of Jesus. We attach ourselves to His goodness, not to our own “shrunken stories.” “Goodness” makes it into Paul’s list of the “fruit of the spirit” in Galatians 5:22: *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, GOODNESS, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.*

I took my first trip to Midland, TX to see our daughter and her family. My son-in-law, who is in the oil/gas industry, drove me to one of their rigs. I met a guy there called “Country” because he sounds so country. Remember, this is west Texas – if they call HIM “country” so you know he had quite the accent. It reminded me of the story of a young woman in west Texas who fell in love with a local cowboy named, “Tex.” Tex wasn’t exactly the romantic type. In fact, he was awkward and very shy. He didn’t know how to handle himself. But she was eager to speed things up in the relationship, so she took things in her own hands. She asked, *“Oh, Tex. Do you think my eyes are beautiful like the glittering stars?”* Tex just looked straight ahead and said, *“Yep. Sure do.”* *“Do you think my teeth are like a beautiful string of pearls?”* *“Yep. Sure do.”* *“Do you think my complexion is as lovely as rose petals?”* *“Yep. Sure do.”* *“Do you think my hair shines like gold in the moonlight?”* Poor old Tex just continued to look straight ahead as he again answered, *“Yep. Sure do.”* The young woman squealed with delight and said, *“Oh Tex, I love you so much. You say the most wonderful things.”*

I hope this morning you will hear the Lord say the most wonderful things about you. Even though there are 8 billion people on earth, our God is an awesome God. Not only is He great, but He is good. And He singles out each and every one of us to speak personally and tenderly to each one of us and tell us the most wonderful thing we’ve ever heard.... *“Bob, Mary, Tex...do you realize how deeply I know you and do you have any idea how much I love you?”*

Unfortunately, far too often people say, *“I’m not sure God really cares for me”* or *“I’m not sure He knows I exist. If He does, I’m not sure He’s concerned.”* Many feel that God is mean, unforgiving, holds grudges against them, and constantly reminds them of past sins. Many feel God is a very legal God who keeps accounts on them – kind of like Santa Claus – *“He’s making a list, checking it twice, gonna fine out who’s naughty/nice.”* Some seminary students were asked to draw a picture of what they thought God looked like. Some drew a huge eye that covered an entire page (God was watching everything they do, hoping to catch them in some failure or wrongdoing). Others drew angry human faces or birds of prey with sharp beaks and talons. But one student said, *“I can’t draw very well, but I’ll bring you a picture.”* He brought in a picture of an angry, demanding Ebenezer Scrooge sitting behind a desk, quill pen in hand with his debit-credit ledger before him. Standing in front of the desk facing Scrooge was small, terror-stricken Bob Cratchit. Pointing to Scrooge, he explained, *“That’s God.”* Pointing to Cratchit he said, *“That’s me.”* This was a young man in seminary, learning to be a preacher. So many people are like him, thinking God is always watching and waiting for them to fail in some way and wants to punish them. Today, we want to try to switch that narrative.

The Magnificent story begins with Genesis 1-2. *“Once upon a time, there was an awesome, blameless, reliable, safe, trustworthy, upright, and wonderful God who created heaven and earth. And He is not only good, He is very good.”* That is His nature. He is the standard of what is good. Genesis 1 describes God has a beautiful, good, and true story. Six times in chapter one it says God created light, water, earth, vegetation, stars, and animals and six times in Genesis 1 it says, “It was good.” And then God created humans. Only this time, it doesn’t say that it was just “good” – it says it was “very good.” It is like human beings were the crown of God’s creation. It says that God created us “In His Image.” Genesis 1 is the picture from 40,000 feet up. It’s a panoramic, wide-scoped view of the creation of the world, including us. It’s majestic. It’s a magnificent story. It continues in Genesis 2, only this time we go into the garden where we meet Adam (“dusty”) and Eve. God created them in His image – not that they looked like God, for God is Spirit, but they had the ability to make decisions that mattered. There was harmony between the original pair. They were naked and not ashamed, afraid, anxious, or fearful. It is a beautiful, good, and true story. Every human being is created in the image of God. God doesn’t say that about strawberries or swordfish or sasquatch – but He does say that about us. I am created in the Image of God. That is our initial Identity.

Genesis 1-2 precedes Genesis 3. This is where sin entered the world. But too many times we begin with the bad news: WE are sinners. While that is true, it’s not a beautiful, good, and true story. We must get the story right. When we present Bad News before the Good News, we have missed the essential message. We do not begin with a shrunken gospel story of “You are a horrible sinner and a despicable mess” or “God is made at you and Jesus took your beating.”

Instead, the scripture has a better way to say it:

Psalm 34:8 *Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!*

Psalm 100:5 *For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.*

Psalm 145:9 *The Lord is good to all, and his mercy is over all that he has made.*

Lamentations 3:22-26 *The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. “The Lord is my portion,” says my soul, “therefore I will hope in him.” The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.*

The Book of Acts describes the activity of God in Jesus in this way: *God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.* (Acts 10:38) When we talk about God, let’s begin here. The Lord is good.

Romans 15:14 *I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another.*

Paul tells the church at Rome that they are “full of goodness.” How did that happen? How did that happen?

For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 6:23 They received the gift of Jesus Christ. That is how we became good.

When we have a proper understanding of who we are, that our identity is rooted in Christ, then we can turn our focus to blessing other people. That’s what Romans 15:14 is all about. The context of this passage is Paul writing to the church in Rome, which consisted of Jewish and Gentile believers. He is trying to bring these two very different groups together in common purpose. The beginning of chapter 15 Paul says, *“Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up.”* He goes on to talk about living in harmony with one another, in accord with Jesus Christ, that they may glorify God with one voice. He talks about welcoming one another just as Jesus welcomed each of them.

Here's our difficulty – Jesus had absolute ideals and absolute grace. Jesus never lowered God’s standards. In his response about keeping the commandments, he never wavered or suggested they should be abandoned. Jesus said, “Be perfect, even as your heavenly Father is perfect.” However, He also said *“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to*

abolish them but to fulfill them." (Matthew 5:17) He spoke about anger, lust, divorce, forgiveness, loving your enemies, not swearing, and being generous. He never wavered on any of them. However, He also tenderly offered absolute grace. He extended that to tax collectors and sinners, as well as the self-righteous like Nicodemus. He turned to the thief on the cross and offered forgiveness. In fact, some of the last words He spoke before He died were, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing." He encountered Saul, on the road to Damascus to kill Christians and he offered grace to him, too. Here's our dilemma – the Absolute Ideals of the Sermon on the Mount and the teaching of Jesus vs. the Absolute Grace given to people who can't possibly keep the Ideals. It's a dual message. Don't change the message. Protect and advocate for the truth. But also, always love sinful people. Don't say "sin isn't sin" but don't pretend anybody is perfect. God's Word is Good. It is perfect and true and righteous altogether.

"The Love of God"

God loves you. God knows everything about you, and He loves you anyway. I know He loves you – He loves even me. There is nothing you have done or can do, to earn His love. His love is given freely and unconditionally. This is grace. There is nothing you can do to lose His love. If you wish, you may reject His love or even God Himself, but He will never stop loving you. The natural response to love is to return it and you will want to love Him in return. If you are like me, you will find areas in your life that prevent you from loving Him as unashamedly as you wish. And you will try to change. This is good. But remember this: God doesn't require it. This must be done out of the love you feel. Perhaps you will succeed in changing some things. But eventually, you will fail. When this happens you will realize, in your state of humanness, that you can never return His love as it should be returned. At this point, ask Jesus to help you – to take over the management of your life and to control as much of it as you can give Him. your love of God, then, will be as great as you will let Christ make it.

Some years ago, a church invited a Methodist preacher to give a lecture. The pastor of the church had a 27-year-old son, Dolph, who was born with Down's Syndrome. He had a warm, joyous presence. He had a wonderful sense of humor. He sang in the church choir and had a job he took very seriously. One day while riding with his dad to church he said he wished he could drive. His dad gently asked, "Do you know why you can't drive?" Dolph said, "Yes. I have Down's Syndrome and in the State of Texas I can't get a driver's license." After the guest preacher had given his lecture, he asked if anyone had any questions. Dolph raised his hand. "Do you think if Jesus saw me, He would see someone who is not normal? Would He see someone with Down's Syndrome?" You could hear a pin drop in the church. The speaker said, "Dolph I believe that Jesus would see what I see. When I look at you, I don't see someone with D.S., but I see a wonderful, delightful child of God." It was obvious that Dolph liked that answer. He said, "I know just what you mean because when I receive communion and see the hands of my dad giving me the bread, I look up but I do not see my dad. Instead, I see the face of Jesus." As you receive communion today, look up. See the face of Jesus looking at you. His face is good. By the gift of His grace, He wants you to receive goodness into your life this day.