

Goodness:
*The light of
the Spirit*

by William E.W. Robinson



A Christian is ...

“What’s your definition of a Christian?”

A leader of a Sunday morning class at church asked me that question. The class’s study of other religions prompted the question, and they wanted to know what the pastor thought.

My answer was that there are a number of possible definitions, such as “a new creation in Christ” or “a follower of the Lord.” Elaborating on such possibilities, we had a constructive conversation about what it means to be a Christian.

Another viable definition is “one who exhibits the fruit of the Spirit in her life.” In fact, in other letters, Paul uses the Greek word translated “fruit” as a metaphor for converts to Christ (e.g., Romans 1:13; Colossians 1:6) and for the expressions of a godly life (e.g., Romans 6:22, 7:4; Ephesians 5:9; Philippians 1:11; Colossians 1:10). John the Baptist also admonished his hearers to bear “good fruit” and Jesus himself taught the importance of producing “good fruit.” We could say, then, that the presence of the Spirit’s “fruit” is a telltale sign of a Christian.

What is “goodness”?

In that telltale list of “fruit,” the sixth is goodness. In the New Testament, the Greek word translated “goodness” (*agathosune*) only occurs in Paul’s letters (Galatians 5:22, and also Romans 15:14; Ephesians 5:9; 2 Thessalonians 1:11). Scholars and Bible translations generally render the word as “goodness,” emphasizing its root idea of “good” (*agathos*). Some translations (such as the New Revised Standard Version) render it as “generosity,” accentuating the word’s connotation of “generous giving.”

Paul doesn’t define or otherwise explicate what he means by “goodness” or “generosity” here or elsewhere in his letters. In Romans, however, the Greek word commonly translated “good” (*agathos*) is contrasted with Greek words usually translated “evil” or “bad” (see Romans 3:8; 7:19; 9:11; 12:9, 13:3; 14:16; 16:19). Some of these instances of “good” and “bad” may be understood as “beneficial” and “detrimental” (see Galatians 6:10). For Paul, then, it seems the virtue of goodness is opposed to the vice of wickedness or badness.

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Because in the Bible goodness is usually associated with God (see Psalm 25:8; Psalm 34:8; Psalm 100:5; Psalm 136:1; Ezra 3:11; Mark 10:17-18), perhaps Paul viewed goodness as an expression of godliness. That's plausible, because goodness is produced in believers by God's Spirit who dwells in them. In fact, without the Spirit, goodness wouldn't be possible.

However goodness is construed here, the word communicates very positive and high moral qualities. Basically, we know a good person or a good deed when we see one, and it's often associated with other positive attributes such as kindness, compassion and helpfulness.

Love heads Paul's list of fruit in Galatians 5 because the other eight virtues may be understood as concrete expressions of love (see Paul's emphasis on love in Galatians 5:13 and the words he uses to describe love in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7, including two that are related to the Greek words translated "kindness" and "patience" in Galatians 5:22). So, we can think of goodness or generosity as one of eight facets on this diamond of love.

Born to be good?

In "Born to Be Good: The Science of a Meaningful Life," Dacher Keltner argues that humans are born with the potential to be good. He explains, "We have evolved a set of emotions that enable us to lead the meaningful life, emotions such as gratitude, mirth, awe, and compassion." He states the purpose of his book is to show that "survival of the kindest may be just as fitting a description of our origins as survival of the fittest." In other words, as humans we're wired not only "to pursue self-interest, to compete, and to be vigilant to the bad rather than the good."

Keltner doesn't deny that humans are also born to be bad. He balances that argument, though, with evidence and studies that show

we are wired to be good, too. Paul (as well as other Jewish, Greek and Roman thinkers in the first century) would likely nod their heads in hearty agreement with the assessment that humans are born to be bad. Indeed, Paul emphasizes the sinfulness of Jews and gentiles (see Romans 3:9-20).

Good by the Spirit

Paul probably would have scratched his head at the idea that humans are *also* born with the potential to be good (although scholars rightly note that Paul didn't espouse a doctrine of original sin or total depravity). Based on Paul's letters, we might say that the Holy Spirit *actualizes* the potential of believers to be good (see Romans 8:1-17). The Spirit *enables* believers to achieve that God-given potential (a potential we could say is based on humans' creation in God's image) by producing the fruit of goodness in them. Paul believes the Spirit does this in believers because they are "in the Spirit" or "new creations in Christ" (especially in light of baptism; see Romans 6:1-4).

What about nonbelievers? How is the innate potential to be good actualized in them? A possible answer is the same as it is for believers: the Holy Spirit. Even though nonbelievers are not "in the Spirit" or "new creations in Christ" (i.e., they're not being sanctified), God's Spirit still works in and through them, enabling them to be and do good. John Calvin, for example, argues that anything good and true is from God, and specifically from God's Spirit. As Reformed theologian John Bolt explains, "If we can theologically conceive of the Holy Spirit giving the gift of life to an unbeliever and even further giving an unbeliever natural gifts ... why could we not conceive of a work of God the Holy Spirit that *providentially* influences an unbeliever's heart and will so that he or she does constructive and externally virtuous acts?"

Texts like John 3:8 bolster belief in this larger work of the Spirit: "The wind blows where it will,



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(JOHN 3:8)

and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” Jesus is saying here that while there’s lack of knowledge about the origins of both the wind and the Spirit, the effects of both are observable. So, for instance, we see the Spirit’s effects when adherents of other religions – or of no religion at all – work for peace and justice or help the poor and the helpless.

Calvin and other Reformed thinkers emphasize that the Spirit’s work in nonbelievers is not the same as the Spirit’s sanctifying work in believers. The Spirit’s work in believers is different in both kind and degree because the Spirit indwells them so that they “walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” (Romans 8:4). Indeed, as British theologian David Wenham asserts, “Undoubtedly Paul [as well as other New Testament authors] would have subscribed to the view that the Christian life can be a life of victory [over sin], if only we will recognize and appropriate the Spirit’s power.”

My goodness, do we need goodness

A Sunday comic strip of “Pearls Before Swine,” the comic by Stephan Pastis, serves as a spot-on illustration of the need for goodness in our world. Two of the strip’s principal characters, Goat and Pig, are scanning the news on their phones, and both recognize that the daily news has provided yet another example of “badness in the world.” Pig is keeping careful count on a whiteboard — he’s reached his 37th example of badness since he started keeping score.

But Pig is undaunted. He walks and walks until he finds a man who seems down on his luck, and he hands the person a dollar. Returning to his whiteboard, he marks one down for “goodness” before remarking to Goat, “I’ll even this thing yet.”

Pig’s example can serve as an expression of our own commitment. As Christians, we can work with the Spirit to actualize our potential to be and do good — and thereby help “even this thing yet.” We appropriate the Spirit’s power to do

just that by listening to and obeying the Spirit through worship, prayer, the Bible, other people and however else the Spirit communicates with us.

Yes, empowered by the indwelling Spirit, may we let our lights shine before others so that they may see our good works and give glory to God (Matthew 5:16). In doing so, may we also help fulfill the words of Desmond Tutu: "Do your little bit of good where you are; it's those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world."

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— DESMOND TUTU

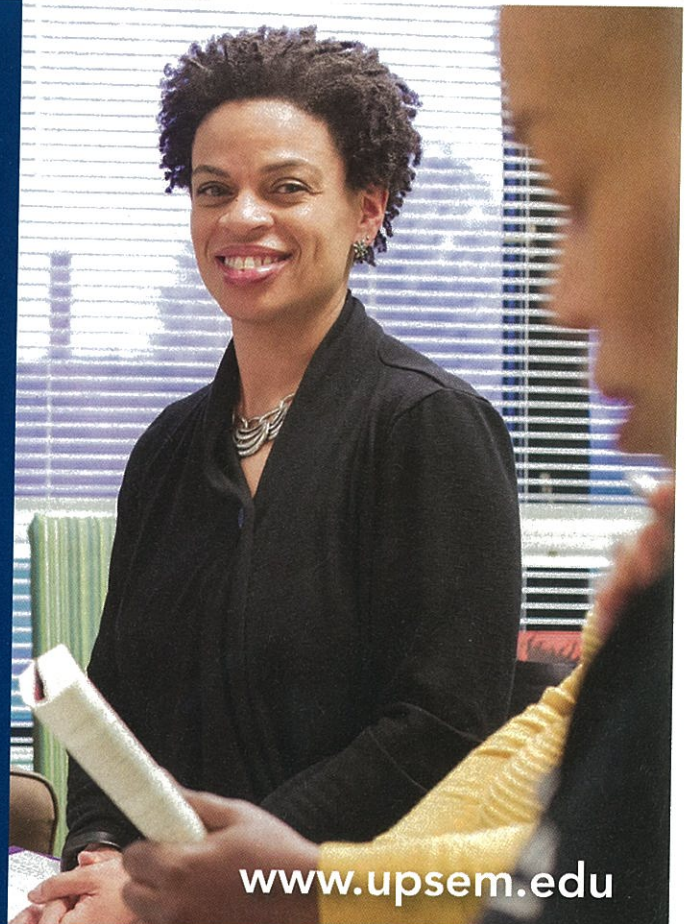
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Limitless forgiveness

In **“Wounded Healer,”** Henri Nouwen observes, **“Nobody escapes being wounded. We all are wounded people, whether physically, emotionally, mentally, or spiritually.”**

Can I get an “amen?” Sometimes people, even those we know best, wound us with unkind words, angry attacks, hurtful actions, spiteful reactions, insensitive comments and other barbs, both big and small. Other times we inflict wounds like these. The healing balm for such wounds and woundedness is *forgiveness*.

Jesus knew that. So when Peter asks him, “How many times must I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus answers, “Not seven times but seventy times seven times.”

Peter’s asking if there’s a statute of limitations on forgiveness, and Jesus’ answer isn’t a math problem! It’s hyperbole: he wants Peter and us to hear – loud and clear – that forgiveness should be limitless.

Jesus hammers his point home with a parable. A king graciously forgives one of his slaves ten thousand talents — an *astronomical* debt. The slave then turns around and refuses to forgive a fellow slave. The king is livid at the forgiven slave’s monumental ingratitude.

Tom Long captures the gist of the parable: “[Given] the size of our sinful debt and the immensity of God’s mercy, no one would dare attempt to ration forgiveness. We know too well that the little boat in which we are sailing is floating on a deep sea of grace and that forgiveness is not to be dispensed with an eyedropper, but a fire hose.” *Limitless forgiveness*.

But how do we do that? By heeding Scripture. Praying. Asking the Spirit to help. Miroslav Volf also recommends “unsticking the deed from the doer.” When someone hurts us – especially repeatedly – we tend to merge the doer with the deed(s). To embody fire-hose forgiveness, we must unstick the deed(s) from the doer. I tried this recently. Seeing someone who’d wronged me, I imagined unsticking the deed from her. It worked. My anger melted.

It also helped to see the image of God in her. Volf calls this *imago Dei* “the core that’s loved by God” with the implication that we should love it, too. That beloved core isn’t sullied by one’s misdeeds. Seeing it can stop us from letting the deed(s) define the doer. But limitless forgiveness is messy at times. We may have to unstick the deed from the doer more than once. And we still need to pray, ask the Spirit to help and take to heart Scripture like the parable of the unforgiving servant.

In “Unconditional?: The Call of Jesus to Radical Forgiveness,” Brian Zahnd tells the story of a Turkish army officer who led a raid on the home of an Armenian family. The parents were killed and their daughters were raped. The soldiers took the girls; the officer kept the oldest for himself. She eventually escaped and later became a nurse. Assigned to a ward for wounded Turkish army officers, one of her patients was the officer who’d murdered her parents and so horribly abused her and her sisters. As he recovered, the officer recognized her and asked, “Why didn’t you kill me?” She replied, “I am a follower of him who said, ‘Love your enemies.’”

Zahnd writes, “For this Christian, no further explanation was necessary. For her, forgiveness was not an option; it was a requirement.” Limitless forgiveness. I’ll bet that was hard work and a messy process. I’ll bet there was prayer, Scripture, the Spirit at work. Maybe she had to unstick the deed from the doer multiple times. Yet, in a world of wounded people, wide divides (political, etc.) and eyedropper forgiveness, Jesus calls us to a life of limitless forgiveness.

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