Whenever Beth and I go on dates, we nearly always end up in some kind of book store. That might make us really big nerds, but we enjoy browsing through all the books and we almost always go home with something new. These days it’s mostly for the kids.

One of the biggest sections in most of the bookstores is the self-help section. There you'll find all kinds of books devoted to you helping you become a better person in some way. Self-help books focus on unlocking the hidden resources within yourself, uncovering fears that hold you back from being all you can be, or they offer some other technique or strategy for getting more out of your life.

You'll find titles like *Achieve Anything in Just One Year*, *The Positive Thinking Secret*, *A Practical Guide to Personal Freedom*, *Healing Your Emotional Self*, and *The Power of Your Subconscious Mind*. This is a multi-billion dollar industry and many of these books become bestsellers. The funny thing is that a lot of these books deal with exactly what Paul is talking about in:

**Galatians 5:22–23 ESV — 22** But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, **23** gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

You can find self-help books about how to have more love, joy, peace, or patience in your life. None of the authors can seem to agree on exactly what constitutes the good life that they want you to achieve. But they all do agree on one thing: you can do it on your own. You have it within you to make your own life better. You can achieve the good life on your own.

The self-help crowd encourages us to look within ourselves for the answers to life's problems. They promise us that we all have good within us. We all have the ability to change ourselves all on our own. That at heart, people are essentially good.

Those kinds of books become bestsellers because we don't want help. We want to do things on our own. We want to be self-sufficient. We generally all tend to think that we are good people. That stands at odds with what Paul tells us in Galatians. He tells us that these things are the fruit of the Spirit working in us. They are not the fruit of our own abilities or efforts. The fruit of goodness seems to be particularly outside of our grasp if we don’t rely on the Spirit.

Goodness goes deeper than just doing good things on occasion. The word that Paul used here in Galatians was root word άγαθός (agathos) which means to meet a high standard of quality or worth or merit. When that word is used of people, it meant that they had a positive moral quality, they took an interest in others, or they were generous.

When we talk about something being good, it usually points to an excellence in whatever that thing was designed to do. The concept of goodness doesn't make any sense without first understanding the purpose of the thing you are talking about. The goodness of something is dependent upon whether it is fulfilling its purpose.

If you think the purpose of a car is to run well, be reliable, and get you dependably from place to place, you may think a car like a Buick, or an Oldsmobile, or maybe a minivan would be a good car. It would serve the purpose well. It would get you reliably from place to place and run well.

But a high school boy probably would not call any of those cars good. At least not good for him, even though they would be very functional and reliable. Your typical High School boy would much rather have a muscle car, a sports car, a convertible, or a pickup truck. Their definition of a good car is one that impresses their buddies, impresses the ladies, and lets him drive fast. The reliability and functionality of the vehicle are not their priorities.

So what does good entail when we are talking about people? How do we know what is good?

Well, again, we have to have an understanding of the purpose behind a human being before we can make the call of whether a person is good or not. Understanding goodness is inseparable from understanding our purpose as human beings. It shouldn’t be a surprise that most people are confused about both.

Shakespeare, in his play Macbeth said “Life is little more than a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing”. Douglas Adams said his book *The Hitchikers Guide to the Galaxy* that the answer to life, the universe, and everything is 42. There are countless other people who have taken a stab at articulating the meaning of life as well who make it obvious that they are either very confused or just trying to make light of a serious matter.

Part of that is because people view their purpose in life as a private, personal thing. It’s totally subjective, something they get to decide. They think their purpose as a human being is up to them. Since their purpose in life is a personal and private thing, it makes goodness subjective as well.

For some people, that might be pretty close to what our world thinks of as good. At times that coincides with what God thinks of as good too, but not nearly often enough. Again, that all depends upon what that person thinks is their ultimate purpose or goal in life.

If a person sees their ultimate purpose as helping others or making a positive impact on the world around them, their view of what is good might look pretty good to the rest of the world. But if an individual sees their purpose in life as getting ahead in life, making a name for themselves, amassing wealth or power, or making sure they are happy no matter what, then their definition of what is good will be skewed that way too.

They may see cheating people out of their money as a good thing if their goal is to make money or amass wealth. But that certainly doesn’t fit in with God’s view of goodness. They may view publicly disgracing someone else as a good thing if their goal in life is to make a name for themselves, to be famous, or to get elected. But again, that certainly doesn’t fit in with God’s view of goodness. There are businessmen all over the world who make it their purpose in life to get as much pleasure and happiness as they can, no matter how it hurts other people. It’s people like that who allow the global $32 billion per year human trafficking industry to exist. Those people see that as a good thing because it serves the purpose of making them feel good, and that is their only purpose in life.

Do you see how dangerous it is to allow our idea of the purpose of our lives, and subsequently our idea of goodness, become a personal and private thing? Because we are fallen and broken people, if the purpose of our lives and what we think is good is subjective, we can end up with some pretty twisted ideas of what is good.

The other danger in that is if we let the purpose of our lives and our idea of goodness be personal and private, then they can change on a whim. They will always be subject to any change that occurs in that person’s life. Sometimes even as volatile as what kind of a mood a person is in that day.

It makes both the purpose of life and what is good or bad totally subjective. There is no concrete way of saying, this is right and that is wrong. We let each person decide what is right and wrong for themselves, and then we wonder why our country, our government, and our world is so chaotic. That very simply does not work. That’s not how God designed our world.

At the same time, we all tend to think we are good people. Often, in our own minds, we think we are morally superior to others around us. We think things like, at least I don’t to that, like that certain person I know. We begin to rank ourselves and other people based on how good we think we are versus how good we think other people are. We like to pretend that we have it all together.

We would rather forget the sin that we struggle with day in and day out. Sometimes we get this idea in our heads that when we accept Jesus and become Christians, everything should all of a sudden be perfect. Worse yet, sometimes we expect that of other people.

If you have ever thought “a Christian shouldn’t be struggling with that” then you have fallen into that mentality already. The truth is that we all have things in our lives that shouldn’t be there. That’s true whether you are not a Christian, you’ve been a Christian for 7 days, or you’ve been a Christian for 70 years. When we first come to Jesus, he wipes our slate clean in God’s eyes. But that’s just the beginning of a lifetime of God changing our lives and our hearts. That’s called sanctification, and it’s a lifelong process. It doesn’t happen overnight.

What we have to realize is that we are all in the same boat. We are all a mess and none of us is good on our own. None of us can claim we are any better than anyone else. As Paul said in Romans 3 we have all fallen short of the glory of God, and we all still do. In God’s eyes, we are all the same. You have fallen short of God’s glory whether you have murdered someone, committed adultery, gossiped about someone, or told a little white lie.

See we categorize people based on levels of goodness. But God only has two levels: those who have fallen short of his glory and those who haven’t. There is only one man in all of history who has not fallen short of God’s glory: Jesus Christ.

Whether we want to admit it or not we all struggle with sin in some way. We know our own downfalls. Can we be good on our own like the self-help people claim? Is there really goodness that dwells within each of us that we can simply tap into to change our lives? Paul says no.

**Romans 7:18–20, 24-25 ESV — 18** For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. **19** For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. **20** Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. … **24** Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? **25** Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.

Paul tells us that no good dwells in our flesh. We cannot be good on our own. In a world where right and wrong is subjective and none of us measures up, how can we cultivate goodness in our lives? Very simply, we can’t. At least not on our own.

God himself is the only one who is truly good. He isn’t just a little good. He is wholly and completely good. There is nothing about God that is not good.

One of the Israelite’s most common worship choruses was:

**1 Chronicles 16:34 ESV — 34** Oh give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever!

We see that praise chorus over and over again throughout the OT. We also see God called good all through the Bible.

**Psalm 16:2 ESV — 2** I say to the Lord, “You are my Lord; I have no good apart from you.”

**Psalm 25:7 ESV — 7** Remember not the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for the sake of your goodness, O Lord!

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

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

**Psalm 135:3 ESV — 3** Praise the Lord, for the Lord is good; sing to his name, for it is pleasant!

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

**Nahum 1:7 ESV — 7** The Lord is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; he knows those who take refuge in him.

One of the most powerful examples of this is when Jesus himself said:

**Mark 10:17–18 ESV — 17** And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” **18** And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.

You will often hear people talk about themselves or other people as ‘good’ people. That’s especially true at funerals. We certainly want to believe that. Much of our world believes that is enough to get you into heaven. But apart from the saving work of Jesus, that makes absolutely no sense. We are not good people on our own. We cannot be good people without God. We are incapable of goodness without him.

As human beings created in the image of a perfectly good God, we were created with a capacity for goodness. But our sin tarnishes and mars the image of God we bear. We are only capable of goodness by the working of the Holy Spirit in us. Through him we have an opportunity to be made new. We have the possibility of a new life in Jesus Christ because of the work of his Spirit in our lives.

Since God alone is good then we can only know what is truly good by the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We can’t trust in our own ideas of what it means to be good. We can’t trust what the world thinks it means to be good. Our notions of what is good have been corrupted by the fallen nature within us. Paul speaks to this in:

**Romans 12:2 ESV — 2** Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

We need that renewal, that transformation in our lives to be able to know what goodness really is. There is a direct link between the goodness in a person’s life and the work of the Holy Spirit in that person’s life. Paul calls the Romans good in Romans 15. In Acts 11 we see Barnabas called a ‘good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith’. That’s not because they were good on their own. It’s because the work of the Holy Spirit was obvious in their lives.

That’s why Paul tells Titus that leaders in the church need to be lovers of good. They need to be people full of the Holy Spirit just like Barnabas. That’s why he warned Timothy that people in the last days would be haters of good in 2 Timothy 3.

Let me ask you this: do you know anyone who hates it when good things happen to them? Probably not. That’s not what Paul is talking about here. Now think about this: do you know anyone who is disconnected from the church, disconnected from God, and wants nothing to do with him? If so, then you know someone who can’t possibly know true goodness. Without God we have no basis of what is truly good. To hate God is to be a hater of good.

Just like with the other fruit of the Spirit, we have to rely on the work of the Spirit to produce goodness in us. But as Rod talked about last week, there are things that we do to work alongside the Holy Spirit as he produces his fruit in us. There are some things we need to do to allow the Holy Spirit to cultivate goodness in us.

1. Learn to name your sin

One of the first things we have to do is learn to name our sin. We have to confess that we are sinners. That we are not good on our own. The Holy Spirit cannot work on cultivating goodness within us as long as we think we are still good enough on our own.

In order to allow the Holy Spirit to work in our lives, we have to realize that we are incapable of goodness on our own. To do that, we have to own up to our sin. To acknowledge that we are not good on our own. That we have fallen short of the glory of God. We do that through confession.

If you are sick and you go to the doctor, they cannot begin to heal you until they diagnose the problem. The same holds true in our spiritual lives. God cannot begin to change our hearts and cultivate goodness in our hearts until we recognize and diagnose the problem in our lives. We can’t move closer to him until we recognize the sin that is holding us back from Him. Confession is a scary thing, because it means admitting to your flaws and mistakes. We have to realize we are confessing to a God who already knows and has already paid for those mistakes.

Confession is also not just for the individual, but for the church as a body as well. When Isaiah confessed to God in Isaiah 6, he not only confessed himself, but on behalf of his entire nation. When we confess our failings as a whole, as a body of Christ, all the finger pointing goes away and we can focus on what we really need: the grace, mercy, and love of God.

1. Studying the Bible

Another way we can open the door for the Holy Spirit to cultivate goodness in us is by studying the Bible. James tells:

**James 1:22–25 ESV — 22** But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. **23** For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. **24** For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. **25** But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

God’s Word is a mirror for us because it shows us what we still lack and where we are falling short. It is not enough to simply read God’s word. We also have to do what it says. We cannot allow the Holy Spirit to cultivate goodness in our lives if we ignore what the Bible tells us to do. We have to read, understand, and put into practice what we see in the pages of the Bible.

1. Imitate others

Finally, we can allow the Holy Spirit to cultivate goodness in our lives by imitating those who have gone before us who have done it well. We see several times in the NT where people are instructed to imitate other people. Paul says in:

**2 Timothy 3:10–15 ESV — 10** You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, **11** my persecutions and sufferings that happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, and at Lystra—which persecutions I endured; yet from them all the Lord rescued me. **12** Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, **13** while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. **14** But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it **15** and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

**1 Corinthians 4:16–17 ESV — 16** I urge you, then, be imitators of me. **17** That is why I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church.

**3 John 11 ESV — 11** Beloved, do not imitate evil but imitate good. Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God.

At first glance that seems very self-righteous or conceited to say, “imitate me, do what I do, and you’ll be fine”. But we find out why that’s not the case in:

**1 Corinthians 11:1 ESV — 1** Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.

It’s not the individuals that we are supposed to imitate, but the one they are following. By imitating those who have gone before us who have followed Christ faithfully, we will learn to follow Christ more closely ourselves. Those people are just reflecting the goodness that has been cultivated in them through the Holy Spirit as well.

Just like the moon has no light of its own, but only shines when the sun shines on it we also have no goodness on our own. We can only reflect the goodness that is in us because of Jesus.

Cultivating goodness in our lives requires much more than just a change of actions on our part. It requires a heart change. That is a change that only God can perform. Goodness is a fruit of the Spirit because only the Holy Spirit working in our lives can affect the changes God desires in us. And only the Holy Spirit working in our hearts and lives can make us truly good people.