

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Pentecost 7
July 8, 2018
Sermon by Pastor Justin Gran
That's good!

—Galatians 5:22, 23
—Mark 10:17-27

So, how are you today? “I’m good.” That is a pretty typical response. I’m good. I say that too even though I should know better. If you want to be grammatically correct you should say, “I’m well.” But often we simply say, “I’m good” really meaning the same thing. I think when most people say, “I’m good” they aren’t trying to make a statement about their character, meaning, “I’m a good person.” They simply mean, “Life is good, it’s going well.” But that brings up an interesting question. As often as I say, “I’m good,” am I really good? What exactly does it mean to be good? We throw the word around often. Sometimes “good” just means ok depending on the tone you use, “Oh I’m good, I guess...” “Those are good, but these are better.” Or be careful with this one: Your wife cooks you a nice meal and she asks, “How is it?” There’s a big difference between “It’s good [said with hesitation]” and “Now that’s good!” What is good?

Let’s let the one who alone is truly good define “goodness” for us. Once a rich young man came to Jesus and the man asked Jesus, ***“Good sir. What must I do in order to inherit eternal life?” “Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered, “No one is good—except God alone.”*** That really changes our working definition of “good,” doesn’t it? God is good. God alone. If even Jesus who is good can raise that question and say, “Why do you call me good?” then I think we can take a step back too and honestly ask, “am I really good?”

Here’s our problem. We define “good” by comparing things to other things or ourselves to other people. Your life seems pretty good when compared to lives that are a total mess. It’s easy to look good and feel good when you compare yourself to someone who is not as good as you. If you want to feel like a good student, there has to be someone in some class with lower grades than you. If you want to assure yourself that you are good at what you do, there’s got to be someone at work who punches in late all the time, someone who’s skating on thin ice. That makes you look very good. If I need to convince myself that I’m a good parent, I can probably turn on the news or search online and find an article about a parent who left their kid in a hot car for hours. “I’m good.”

Trying to define goodness by comparison to others is a dangerous game to play, though. As good as I may seem compared to some, there are others who seem better. You may be a good student, but then there’s that one that’s always at the top of the class and the terrible thought crosses your mind, “maybe I’m not good enough.” You’re a good employee, but there’s that coworker who gets higher praise or better performance reviews and all of a sudden you don’t feel as though you’re good enough. You have a bad day as parent; you lose your patience, your kid gives you the cold shoulder. That same day, you see a family picture of some friends on a vacation and they’re having a blast. Or you see a post on social media from a “super mom” who has planned this elaborate activity for her kids. And the awful question pops into your head. “Am I a good enough mom? Am I a good enough dad?” How often do we look at ourselves and then look at someone else and wonder, “Am I good enough?”

Well, God answers that question for us so that we don’t have to keep beating ourselves up and keep tirelessly wondering and worrying, “Am I good enough?”—The Lord says to our worrying hearts, “No. You are not good enough. You are not even good. Why do you think you are good? ***No one is good—except God alone.***” God is the benchmark for goodness, not the guy who lives next door to you or the student in the desk next to you. I can’t even compare myself to my neighbor and say with confidence, “I’m good enough.” How can I compare myself to God and ever say, “I’m good?” It’s impossible for you and me to be good enough. Impossible to enter the kingdom of God by our attempts to be good. That’s not good.

So often we tirelessly worry if our “good” is good enough, but we never find rest and relief until we confess, “I’m not good enough... but Jesus Christ, my Savior, is.” None of us has to go away sad today like that young man. You can stop spinning your tires and grasping at straws trying to find some fleeting assurance that you’re good enough and you can grab onto your Savior who is good enough. More than good enough.

“Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered “No one is good—except God alone.” There Jesus stood before that man and his disciples. He is the only one who in and of himself is really good because he is really God. But look where Jesus your Savior is standing. He’s not high up in heaven where he alone deserves to be. He doesn’t consider himself too good to mingle with filthy sinners dressed in filthy rags. No. He is standing right in front of them. He came to bring the only good that there is into this world and into your life. You want to know what good really is? Look at Jesus. That’s good! He loved his Father in heaven and he even obeyed his own

creatures, Mary and Joseph. That's good! He loved his friends, but he also loved his enemies. That's good! He never once coveted, hated, lied, or lusted. That's good! He never acted out of selfish or improper motives. That's good! God the Father himself declared him to be good, once at the start of his ministry and once toward the end. He said, ***"This is my Son, with him I am well pleased."*** He looked at Jesus and said, "Now that's good!"

Jesus doesn't just define good for us. He supplies good for us. Earlier in Galatians, before Paul lists goodness as one of the fruit of the Spirit he wrote, ***"You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ."*** Clothed with Christ. Clothed with goodness. All the not so good things, all of the bad things we have been guilty of, those sins that have expelled us from God's kingdom, they are covered with the good and holy blood of Christ. All of the deeds we thought were good but that were tainted with impure motives are replaced by every one of Christ's good and holy deeds. All of the filthy rags we've tried to pass as acceptable clothing before God are removed and here we stand clothed with the goodness of his own Son. And what does he say to us? "This is my Son. This is my daughter. With you I am well pleased." In Christ, God declares you to be good. He declares you to be right, holy, perfect, just like his own Son. That's good!

"Am I good enough? Did I do a good enough job today at whatever it is that I am supposed to do?" Those thoughts will return on a regular basis. But throw all of those self-centered worries out the window and look at Jesus. Instead of looking at your own imperfect works and incomplete tasks of the day, look into the waters of your baptism. Look into the pages of scripture. Look at the good gift hidden in the bread and the wine and praise Jesus saying, "God is good. He has been good to me." He's taken all your sin away, he calls you his child, and he strengthens you to live a new life; he enables you to live a good life. The good life of a Christian doesn't always look like what our world calls a good life. To the world it may look not that good at all. But living the good life of Christian really is good. It's good because it's filled with God's grace, his undeserved goodness and love. It's also full of fruit that God himself considers to be good.

Apart from Christ, there is nothing good in me... but I'm no longer apart from Christ. I am in him and he is in me. And so, very graciously, God looks at who we are in Christ and what we do in Christ and he actually says, "That's good."

When God looks at the things you do as an employee, a student, a son or a daughter, a parent, a teacher or whatever it is that you do, he says, "that's good." Even on the days when you look back and think, "I don't know what that was but that wasn't good. I dropped the ball. I didn't have the right attitude." God says, "That's good." And that still baffles me! How could he say that? It's because when he sees you at work, or at school, or in line at the grocery store, or sitting at the dinner table, he sees Jesus. In you he sees Jesus and he says, "That's good." You are clothed in Christ... and so is the work that you do, whatever it is that you do—you are clothed in Christ, dressed in Jesus. That's good.

Like any good thing, we want more of it. The same is true with this fruit of goodness. As new creations dressed in Jesus, we want more goodness in our life. Imagine going up to Jesus like that rich young man, but instead you recognize that you are not good enough but Jesus is and his goodness counts for you? So you ask him, "Good Savior, what can I do to thank you for all the goodness you have shown to me and produced in me?" In response to that very different question, Jesus could say the same thing he said to that young man: ***"You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honor your father and mother.'"*** The same laws that once pointed out that we are not good enough become our guide for doing what is good and pleases God. And his Spirit that he sent to sanctify, to make us holy in his sight, enables us to actually do good. Take a step back and don't just take a look at works themselves, but look at God's grace that has enabled you to do them and say, "That is good. God is good. To God be the glory."

Amen.