

Genesis 1:1–5, 27–28, 31 (NIV)

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. ²Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

³And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. ⁴**God saw that the light was good**, and he separated the light from the darkness. ⁵God called the light “day,” and the darkness he called “night.” And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.

²⁷ So God created mankind in his own image,

in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

²⁸ God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

³¹ God saw all that he had made, and **it was very good**. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day.

Mark 10:17–19 (NIV)

¹⁷ As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. “Good teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

¹⁸ “Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good—except God alone. ¹⁹ You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honor your father and mother.’”

James 1:16–18 (NIV)

¹⁶ Don’t be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. ¹⁷ Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. ¹⁸ He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.

God is good and goodness comes only from God.

To understand almost anything in this world, you have to start at the right place. So it with this week’s fruit: goodness. In a nutshell, goodness is derived from God and God alone. Good is not merely something God does, “goodness” describes the very nature of God. Further, whatever measure of goodness we may have ourselves is derived from God. We see this from the opening verses in the Bible.

Genesis – a book of beginnings

It is impossible to overstate the importance of the book of Genesis to the rest of the Bible. It opens with two creation stories, the first written from God’s perspective and the second from the humans’ perspective. What quickly follows is the story of the humans’ tragic decision to turn away from God seeking to be like gods themselves. We then get the story of Noah, a story of “uncreation” and a fresh start that proves little better than the first. Then, in Genesis 12, we are told how God chose a lone husband and wife, Abraham and Sarah, with whom God made a covenant that all the families of the earth would be blessed through them. As the rest of the 50-chapter book unfolds, we see God’s redemptive work moving forward through Abraham and Sarah’s descendants.

God's good creation

The story begins simply enough. God creates everything there is – yes, everything. If it exists, God created it. And God pronounces it all *good*. All of it. Every corner, every last bit and particle – *good*.

And of all the creatures that God creates, one creature is made in God's image – the humans. And God gives the humans the responsibility for (that's what we mean by "stewardship" or "dominion") for God's *good* creation (Gen 1:26).

We learn further, that this good God creates a beautiful place for the humans, where they can live and work and love. In beautifully evocative imagery, we're told that God comes to walk with them in the evenings. There is even a tree in the garden from which the humans will eat so they will live in eternity with God. The humans are free to enjoy God, one another, and this garden with one exception. There is one tree from which they are not to eat. If they do, God tells them, they will die, not live.

That's the big picture. God creates the cosmos and everything in it, and it is all good. There is nothing but hope and anticipation of the glories to come. It is all good, so very good.

Only from God

We tend to think of goodness as merely the sum of moral acts that please God and benefit others ourselves, such as acts of compassion, kindness, charity, mercy, justice and more. But the word "goodness" in the Bible speaks to something more that is difficult to grab hold of, even mysterious.

The *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* does a good job of bringing this out.

Goodness is a mysterious term that communicates a sense of delight and fathomless depth—a glad mystery. A review of the words *goodness* or *good* as found in the Bible quickly reveals the reason for this: goodness in the Bible is God himself. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit *are* good, *do* good and *create* good. God's people are not good in themselves but become capable of doing good through the empowerment of God's Spirit and the presence of God in their lives through Jesus Christ. What then is goodness? How does the beauty of the Bible's imagery uncover for us the richness of the words *good* and *goodness* that appear more than six hundred times in the Bible?

The Goodness of God. Goodness is in accordance with God's nature. As it is in the nature of water to be wet or fire to be hot, it is the nature of God to be good. This characteristic is not changeable or diminishing, nor does it have a beginning or an end. When Moses requests to see the glory of God, God replies, "I will make all my goodness pass before you." But "you cannot see my face; for man shall not see me and live" (Ex 33:19–20 RSV). God's goodness is here an image of mystery, transcending human comprehension. During the same encounter, God passes before Moses and proclaims, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty" (Ex 34:6–7 RSV). All of these qualities—mercy, grace,

love, faithfulness, forgiveness and righteousness are what it means for the Lord to be good.¹

Thus, goodness is the summation of “love, faithfulness, forgiveness and righteousness.” This is true of God’s goodness and even our own derivative goodness, for we cannot be called “good” apart from God. This isn’t to say that people cannot be kind or loving apart from knowing God (see Romans 2), but it is to say that they cannot be “good” apart from God.

This requires us to think about goodness very differently, for we throw the term around too easily and fail to ground it in God. Jesus’ most well-known parable is typically referred to as the “good Samaritan.” However, Jesus never refers to the Samaritan as “good” or even doing a “good” thing. The Samaritan (who does not know God, but is a Gentile) knows who is his neighbor and showers kindness upon the beaten man (see the study from last week).

Here is more on goodness:

The Fruit of the Spirit. People, made in God’s image and restored to that image by redemption, are also capable of good. Their actions, like God’s in a perfect sense, are declared to be “good.” The “good deeds” of Hezekiah were so noteworthy that they were committed to a written record (2 Chron 32:32). The writer of Proverbs declares that “a good man obtains favor from the Lord” (Prov 12:2) and is filled with the fruit of his deeds (14:14). Joseph of Arimathea was “a good and righteous man” (Lk 23:50), and Barnabas was “a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith” (Acts 11:24). Here then is another category of goodness in the Bible—characters who display the godlike qualities that the Bible portrays as comprising the ultimate good.

Goodness is one of the celebrated fruits of the Spirit that characterize those who belong to Christ (Gal 5:22–24). We noted earlier that God is the source of all goodness; hence, “he who does good is of God” (3 Jn 11). Human goodness is not self-generated: “No one does good, not even one” (Rom 3:12), Paul writes; and again, “nothing good dwells in me” (Rom 7:18). Yet Paul can enjoin those who have the Spirit to “do good to all men” (Gal 6:10), just as Jesus commanded his followers to “do good to your enemies” (Lk 6:35). Jesus also taught that “a good tree bears good fruit” (Mt 7:17).²

“The fruit of the Spirit is . . .”

In closing, let’s step back from the week-by-week look at the fruit and understand that though the “works of the flesh” are listed in the plural, the “fruit of the Spirit” is singular and, as always in Paul, communal. Charles Cousar brings us more on this:

The first thing of note is that the word “fruit” (5:22) appears in the singular (in contrast to the plural “works” in 5:19), giving a cohesive and unified character to what the Spirit produces. It is not as if the Spirit in one individual creates love, in another joy, and in a third gentleness. To be sure, Paul speaks of the variety of the gifts in this way, the Spirit apportioning “to each one individually as he wills” (1 Cor. 12:11). But the fruit of the Spirit is one and thus the list indivisible. At the same time, it is not coincidental that

¹ Leland Ryken et al., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 343–344.

² *ibid.*

love heads the list. “It is ‘love’ which embraces and includes all the other ‘virtues’ which follow so that, no less than 1 Cor. 13:4ff. with which it is strikingly parallel, this list may be regarded as a description of the concrete ways in which love is expressed” (V.P. Furnish, *Theology and Ethics in Paul*, p. 88). Love is not one characteristic of the Christian life which can be numbered alongside many others; it is inherent in what it means to be led by the Spirit and thus the quintessence of life “in Christ” (cf. 5:6, 13–14).

The list serves an important function. If there are those in the Galatian congregations who have been carried away by their ecstatic experiences of the Spirit and have become the occasion for controversy, this list calls them back to earth and to the fundamental activity of God in human lives. It contains, beyond the gift of love, a striking number of terms which have about them the mark of restraint and steadiness over against exuberance and self-assertion. For example, there is “patience,” the quality of being long-suffering toward those whose conduct may in fact be calculated to provoke anger; there is “faithfulness,” reliability in a world where one may often be the victim of another’s unreliability; there is “gentleness” or “meekness,” the avoidance of unnecessary anger or sudden brusqueness or self-assertion; and there is “self-control,” the discipline of one’s impulses and desires. The composite reminds those who tend toward an unbridled religious fervor or whose understanding of freedom partakes of a Dionysian spirit, that while love embraces joy, it must also cope with the ordinary and the ugly, with the arrogant and the ill-tempered. Life in community is never easy, and the promise here is that the Spirit will bring those specific qualities of love which make for well-being and peace.³

Scott Engle’s Bible Classes

Monday Afternoon Class

Current study: *Starting Ruth this week!*

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott’s Facebook page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC.”

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

Current study: *Acts*

Meeting at 12:00 noon Tuesday in person in Piro Hall and on-line on Scott’s Facebook ministry page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC”.

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week’s lesson stands on its own. This is very “drop-in.” Both classes are recorded and are available each week in my podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by “Scott Engle Bible Studies”.

Scott’s Sunday Class

This week: Beginning a new series: *The Atheist Delusion: Science, the Bible, and the Truth in Which We Live*.

³ Charles B. Cousar, [Galatians](#), Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1982), 139–140.

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott's YouTube channel. Search for "Scott Engle." These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.