



# Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Tim Shapiro -  
July 9, 2017 Sermon

---

## God's Wisdom and Our Character

Ephesians 1:8-9

I have been a Presbyterian minister since 1984 (that fact is getting some dust on it by now). For about 19 of those years I preached almost every Sunday. I was thinking about my preaching, and I thought back about how I don't think I've ever preached a sermon on being a good person.

I said this to my wife, and she said, "Physician heal thyself," pretty strong words coming from a veterinarian. So, I've been thinking about this. Maybe it's the tone of our country right now, or maybe it's just me having a challenging summer at work, but it seems that our faith should ultimately help us live better lives. Shouldn't our churches be about building better people?

What is a good person? Is there such a thing?

What does our faith say about such goodness?

What are the means of grace (the tools of faith) that help us be good?

So I would like to have a conversation with you, as much as we can have a conversation with one person doing all of the talking, what it means to be good from a Christian perspective.

There's a little risk involved because as soon as I begin a sermon on being a good person there is at least a shadow of suggestion that somehow I know about being a good person. When the truth is that what I know is the challenge to be a good person.

We talk about good people we know. Someone says, "We went to visit the Joneses in Madison, Wisconsin. They fed us our choice of bratwurst (I didn't know there were so many different kinds of bratwurst), homemade apple pie and a kind of sun tea that tasted like nectar. They gave us use of their swimming pool any time of the day; they gave us the run of the house. Let me tell you those Joneses are good people."

We talk like that.

There are good and bad people in the Bible, that's for sure. I mean Jesus he's good; no, he's more than good. Jesus is ultra-good. Jesus is more than ultra-good. Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus is Messiah. Jesus says such beautiful things his goodness comes shining through brighter than the sun on the beach on a summer day. He says to you and me: "You are the light of the world. You are the salt of the world." I guarantee you the things he says will make your heart melt. Blessed are the poor Jesus says. Blessed are those that grieve. He says the kingdom of God is near.

He not only says beautiful things he did the most singular, profound act; he gave himself up as the unmistakable portrayal of God's love for us. Jesus is more than just a good person. He is the Messiah.

There are good and bad people in the Bible. I consider Martha, a good person. You may know the story of Martha and Mary. Jesus visits them in Bethany, Wisconsin. Mary enjoys listening to all the beautiful things Jesus says. She gets the better deal. Martha doesn't get to hear the sweet, rhythmic sound of Jesus' voice. Martha labors as the hostess. Martha serves these hors d'oeuvres, this kind of crispy, Greek flaky wrap filled with lamb and goat cheese. It's so good. And the pies she brings out are full of figs that are both tangy and sweet. Martha is doing all the work. She's setting up chairs. She's serving the food. She's cleaning the dishes. She's sweeping the floor. I know to compliment Martha as a good person feeds into the stereotype of what our culture still expects from females and doesn't expect from males; I don't want to do that. But sorry, sometimes someone has to leave the kitchen scrubbed, turn off the lights make sure the cat's out and the kids are safe in bed. Martha does this. I think she's a good person.

There are bad people in the Bible too.

I think of Saul. Or is it Paul? You don't have to know the whole story of Saul, just the Cliff Notes version. He was a persecutor of the early Christians who, while on a terrorist mission, turned into the most prominent supporter of Christ. His name got changed to signify the transformation from bad to good.

If those of you on this side of the sanctuary knew Saul before the Damascus Road trip you'd say he was a bad person. Those of you who knew Saul before Damascus Road know he didn't have anything good to say about the followers of Jesus. He was the kind of neighbor that would put a fence on your property. He's the kind of person for whom the phrase toxic people was coined.

But after Damascus Road where he had this encounter with Jesus Christ, he's a different person. We wouldn't have a church without Paul. It's Paul who gives meaning to the words sanctification and grace and wisdom. It is Paul who speaks to us in the passage I read from I Corinthians today:

*Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom...we speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages*

Paul's giving us a kind of being a good person formula that goes like this: God's wisdom – however ultimately secret and hidden – shapes our character and our character shapes our being a good person.

God's wisdom shapes our character so you and I might consistently possess positive qualities that people can depend on for the sake of God's intentions.

The positive qualities are virtues like integrity, humility, prudence, gratitude, mercy or what Eugene Peterson calls a long obedience in the same direction.

As political commentator David Brooks has noted these are the sort of things, we hope people say about us in a eulogy.

Now theologically this has been contested territory; which maybe one of the reasons why there aren't that many sermons in the Presbyterian Church on being a good person. This notion that any one of us can consistently discern God's wisdom and embody such positive qualities is contested landscape. On the one hand, you have the Wesleyan tradition that proposes that sanctification can be achieved; that we have Christ in us, that we can be Christ-like, that we can take on the purity of Christ.

On the other end of the continuum, we have the descendants of John Calvin and Martin Luther who say no, don't get your hopes too high on sanctification; the way to go is really through grace. We are saved by grace because you are always going to fall short.

This contested territory makes me think that I'm not sure that anyone of us can say I'm a good person because at any given moment that might not be true. I would hate to be judged by my worst moment.

I was with a group of clergy for a day-long retreat. We were asked by the leader to tell the group our worst moment in life, the moment we were most embarrassed by our behavior. This created a worse moment for me because I got angry and said to the leader, "You tell us your worst moment." Then I lied; unwilling to tell another person my worse moment, I told like my 76th worst moment.

I know episodes in my life where I didn't support my wife. I've failed to speak up when someone shared a racist joke. I'm sorry, that's really wrong. I don't handle my inner world very well when I'm stressed.

I once was telling a good friend, a friend I trust, about how I was going to have to fire someone at work and the harm it was going to cause this person, and he looked at me, and he said, "Tim, you harm someone everyday of your life. Welcome to the human dilemma."

No wonder our faith has categories like sanctification and grace because I'm not sure that anyone of us can say I'm a good person because at any given moment...

So, here we go: I think this good person dilemma has more to do with how we make room or don't make room for God's wisdom to shape our character over a lifetime. It's not episodic. You have to take the whole of your life; the cumulative effect of your life and not just any moment when you're at your worst or at your best because the truth is that most of us are never as consistently bad as we are on our bad days nor are we consistently as good as we are on our best days.

Thankfully, we aren't left without means of grace. Thankfully, there is a resource that allows us some direction about what it means to live a good life and be a good person and it is in the scripture that Nancy read where Paul addresses the church in Ephesus.

Paul writes, "*With all wisdom and insight God has made known to us the mystery of God's will.*"

Now, this is in direct contradiction to the I Corinthians passage where Paul says God's wisdom is mostly mystery.

The word for wisdom that Paul uses in this particular location of Scripture is only used once. It is the Greek word *phronesis*. When a word only shows up once in Scripture it makes me think one it's not important, a glitch, a blip; or it's really important; it stands out; take notice. I think the latter is true in this case. The word *phronesis* is used all the time in ancient Greek philosophy, and it means practical wisdom. And practical wisdom means a specific kind of wisdom. It is not the unfathomable, unknowable wisdom of God. It is God's down to earth wisdom; the ability to do the right thing in the right way at the right time. I think this notion of wisdom, doing the right thing in the right way at the right time is something we can carry in our pocket when we are making certain decisions about life that are important. We can pull practical wisdom out of our pocket and ask ourselves if we are doing the right thing, in the right way, at the right time.

I like practical wisdom because it is a modest proposal. Such wisdom doesn't all of a sudden engulf us with the holiness of Christ, but it does help us avoid the heresy called antinomianism which wrongly asserts that what we do doesn't matter because, hey, we can always use God's grace as justification.

It's nice to have an ancient guide congruent with our Christian seeking.

Think about something important to you that is unsolved; that is still waiting for you in the future. Don't think about the past. The past is finished and gone; everything is fresh and new.

Think about something down the road. You decide how far. Maybe it is conversation you need to have with your daughter. Maybe it is a decision about work. Maybe you want to do something good and edgy about race or economic justice or mental health. You choose. It's your life.

But think about something down the road where the three questions of practical wisdom might serve as a means of grace for you: What is the right thing? How can I do the right thing in the right way? What is the right time to do this right thing in the right way?

There, my sermon on being a good person. I'm not sure it is a good sermon. Maybe good enough. Because whatever it means to be a good person is something that involves our use of God's means of grace over a lifetime, not just any one, single episode.

One last thing. Some of us will hear this sermon and think, "I'm a good person. I pay taxes. I go to church. I love my family. I give to charity." Yes. Thank goodness. Would you be willing to run for office?

But some of us will hear this sermon and think, "Oh, my gosh, I'm not a good person, I've messed up. I have so many days I'd like to forget."

Please. Please. Please. That's not what this is about. The very fact you have that reaction is evidence you have the means of grace available all around you and that you, yes you, consistently seek to possess positive qualities that people can depend on for the sake of God's intentions.