

all things and has all things and lacks nothing. It is lord over sin, death, and hell, and yet at the same time it serves, ministers to, and benefits all men. But alas in our day this life is unknown throughout the world; it is neither preached about nor sought after; we are altogether ignorant of our own name and do not know why we are Christians or bear the name of Christians. Surely we are named after Christ, not because he is absent from us, but because he dwells in us, that is, because we believe in him and are Christs one to another and do to our neighbors as Christ does to us.<sup>2</sup>

*Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. (Eph 4:30-32)*

## SEVEN

### Cultivating Goodness in the Midst of Self-Help

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*For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. (Eph 5: 8-11 NIV)*

*Either make the tree good, and its fruit good, or make the tree bad, and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit . . . . The good person brings good things out of a good treasure, and the evil person brings evil things out of an evil treasure. (Mt 12:33, 35)*

**T**hose who have been to their local bookstore in the last several years know that one of the fastest growing sections is the area marked "self-help." Here one can find a wide range of titles that offer readers advice on how to live more satisfying lives. Many focus on unlocking hidden resources or uncovering debilitating fears, while others offer some technique for getting more out of life. While browsing through two local bookstores, I compiled the following list of representative titles from their "self-help" sections:

*Finding Joy: 101 Ways to Free Your Spirit and Dance with Life*  
*The Family: A Revolutionary Way of Self-Discovery*  
*Unlimited Human Potential . . . A New Definition*  
*Unlocking the Secrets of Your Childhood Memories*



*Beyond Negative Thinking: Reclaiming Your Life Through Optimism  
You Can Heal Your Life*

*Love 101: To Love Oneself Is the Beginning of a Lifelong Romance*

*Love Yourself, Heal Your Life Workbook*

*Help Yourself to Happiness*

*Beyond Fear: The Quantum Leap to Courageous Living*

*The Doctor's Guide to Instant Stress Relief*

*How to Handle Trouble: A Guide to Peace of Mind*

If you wonder who reads such books, the answer is that lots of people do. Many of these books are bestsellers, having sold hundreds of thousands of copies. What does the popularity of such books tell us about what people are looking for and where they are looking for it? First, I couldn't help but notice that several titles explicitly state that they deal with such things as love, joy and peace. Second, it is also hard to miss the characteristic North American virtues that find their way into these titles: freedom, optimism, happiness, individualism, immediacy ("instant stress relief"). Finally, although these authors may not agree with each other on what "the good life" entails, there appears to be a remarkable consensus that people have within themselves what is necessary to attain it.

On one level, one hears in all of this a clear echo of many of the themes from the previous chapter, especially with regards to the premium placed on self-sufficiency and autonomy. But there is also a subtle difference. Whereas the value our society places on self-sufficiency shapes us to think that receiving help is a sign of weakness or incompetence, the cult of self-help encourages us to think that we are not only competent to take care of our own problems but also morally equipped to do so as well. I admit that this subtle difference may be less than obvious, but I hope that after we have examined the notion of "goodness" we will be able to see why cultivating this fruit in our contemporary situation presents a slightly different, if no less formidable, set of challenges.

### The Character of Goodness

Trying to grasp the character of the sixth fruit of the Spirit poses several

difficulties. First, the word that Paul employs in his letter to the Galatians (*agathōsynē*) does not appear at all in secular Greek, only appears three additional times in the New Testament and only occurs about a dozen times in the Greek Old Testament. In other words, there are not a lot of places to go to see how the word was commonly used. Second, examining the related words does not necessarily help. As in English the Greek word translated "goodness" is closely linked to the concept of "good" (*agathos*). But this term has such a wide range of meaning and is so common in both the Greek Old Testament (over five hundred occurrences) and the New Testament (over one hundred occurrences) that we may still find it difficult to determine what goodness entails.

The word *good* usually points to some excellence (what the Greeks called *aretē*) that is befitting the object described. As such, the notion of "good" cannot usually be separated from some idea of that object's purpose. For example, if I remark that I have a good watch, most will understand me to be commenting on the watch's worth as an instrument for keeping time. That there is little room for misunderstanding here says less about my watch and more about the agreements our culture has about the purpose of watches. But we do not share such agreements about a lot of other things. If a young man says that he has a good car, what we think he is talking about will likely be connected to what we think he believes about the purpose of cars. If he is interested primarily in transportation, his comment will mean one thing; if he is concerned more about his status with a certain group of friends, his comment will likely mean something else. And if he is an antique collector, his comment will most certainly mean something else again.

What do we mean when we say that someone is a good person? As with kindness, we usually mean more than the purely negative judgment—that this person abstains from engaging in evil and malicious acts. We are usually also making an affirmation—that this person does what is "right" or "good." But as with the good watch, making such a judgment about a good person entails believing something about the purposes of human existence. Where do we get our notions of the purpose of human existence and of what counts for goodness? Three important points must be made at this juncture.



First, the consistent witness of Scripture and the church is that God alone is unequivocally good. As noted in the previous chapter, the common refrain of Israel's worship life was, "O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good [*ḥēb*]; for his steadfast love [*hesed*] endures forever." Normally the Septuagint translates *ḥēb* with the Greek word *agathos* (although, we also noted in the last chapter, it occasionally translates it as *chrēstos*—"kind"). One of the most powerful echoes of this witness in the New Testament are Jesus' words to the rich young man, who addresses Jesus as "Good Teacher." Jesus responds, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone" (Mk 10:18; cf. Mt 19:16-17, Lk 18:19). Paul is likewise adamant that "goodness" does not characterize our sinful human condition. He writes:

For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it; but sin that dwells within me. . . . Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! (Rom 7:18-20, 24-25)

Second, if human bondage to sin makes us incapable of goodness apart from God, we are nevertheless created with the capacity and potential for goodness. This capacity for goodness stems from our being created in the image of a God who is perfect goodness. Although our bondage to sin weakens our capacity for goodness, this capacity is capable of being renewed by the work of the Holy Spirit within us. A new way of life is made possible by Christ and the work of the Spirit. Paul has such confidence in the work of the Spirit that he can assert, later in his letter to the Romans, that they are "full of goodness [*agathōsynē*], filled with all knowledge, and able to instruct one another" (Rom 15:14). Or as Paul tells the Ephesians, we are "created in Christ Jesus for good works" (Eph 2:10). Finally, in one of Scripture's most arresting passages, the Second Epistle of Peter strikingly asserts that God's divine power has provided us what we need in order that we may participate in the divine nature, in the very life of God:

His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness [*aretē*]. Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature. For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness [*aretē*], and goodness with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love. For if these things are yours and are increasing among you, they keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Pet 1:3-8)

Third, if God alone is good and humans are capable of good only by the work of God's Spirit, then knowing what counts for good can also only be determined under the guidance of God's Spirit. In other words, humans should not necessarily trust their notions of goodness, because there is reason to believe that our notions of goodness are themselves corrupt. Paul certainly suggests as much when he urges the Romans to be transformed in order that they will be able to discern what is good: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom 12:2). In a similar way, prayers were being offered on behalf of the Colossians that "you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God" (Col 1:9-10).

Understanding the connection between the work of the Spirit and goodness may explain why Barnabas is described as "a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith" (Acts 11:24). Moreover, it may also suggest why leaders in the church are required to be "lovers of goodness" (Tit 1:8) and why Christians are warned that in the last days people will be "haters of good" (2 Tim 3:3).

Paul brings to a close his first letter to the Thessalonians with what might



at first glance appear to be a hodgepodge of disconnected admonitions. (That this passage has traditionally been broken into eleven separate verses no doubt contributes to this impression.) But given the ways in which we have seen that the fruit of the Spirit are interconnected, perhaps we can see some connections that are at first glance difficult to see:

But we appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labor among you, and have charge of you in the Lord and admonish you; esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the faint hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil. (1 Thess 5:12-22)

These various admonitions, like the fruit of the Spirit themselves, share a common feature: their other-directedness. As a result, such practices as "doing good to one another" cannot easily be divorced from the practices of admonishing, encouraging, helping, rejoicing, praying and giving thanks. We must remember that being transformed into the image of Christ requires our being transformed into people who are capable of deep communion with God and one another. Thus the other-directedness that characterizes the life of goodness is nothing less than the posture that is required if we are to live out the purpose for which God has created us all.

### Obstacles to a Life of Goodness

If discussions about "goodness" and "good" are inseparable from understandings of the purposes of human existence, then it should come as no surprise that many of us are deeply confused about both. Or more precisely, because most people believe that views about the purpose of human existence are part of the private realm (as discussed in an earlier chapter), they regard their views about goodness and the good to be likewise private and personal.

As a result, people in our society not only disagree about the purposes of human existence, but they have no way to adjudicate these disagreements. Indeed, because these disagreements are in the private realm, there is little reason to try to adjudicate them.

*Democratizing goodness.* For some people, of course, it is a mistake even to inquire about the purposes of human existence. For them, as for Shakespeare's Macbeth, life is little more than a "tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." But for the vast majority, it appears that the purposes of human existence are not so much absent or illusory as they are derived and sustained purely at the personal level. This suggests why we find it increasingly difficult to discuss what used to be called "the common good." In its place we have substituted the notion that individuals should be free to determine for themselves what is "good" and "right" in any particular situation. Although there are some legal boundaries that would restrain us from doing what we agree is wrong to do, there is little that would help us know what is right or good to do. As a result, the "good" and the "right" are increasingly being reduced to what is legal; in short, if one has not broken any laws, one is a "good" or "moral" person. Or even more to the point, if one is merely decent, one is increasingly considered good. For example, note that we routinely call one of our favorite Bible stories the "parable of the good Samaritan," even though Jesus nowhere identifies him as such. Jesus simply identified him as a "certain Samaritan," presumably because he did no more (and certainly no less) than any decent Samaritan would have done. In contrast, we tend to think of him as the *really good* Samaritan, as if what he did was exceptional or even heroic.

We also see this tendency toward "democratizing goodness" in that widespread cultural conviction that all non-law-breaking people are on a moral par with one another. People who suggest or act otherwise by embodying convictions that they believe are more than simply their own personal preferences are routinely derided as being "self-righteous goody-goodies." Indeed, most children learn from an early age that you do not want to be distinguished from your peers by being too good, for doing so will often as not earn you their scorn.



It is perhaps telling that we often see such tendencies in the church as well. Most Christians rightly acknowledge that they are called to live differently than their non-Christian neighbors, and many believe (perhaps justifiably) that they really are better people. Most of us are not murderers, rapists or terrorists (though neither are most of our non-Christian neighbors), and so we easily fall into the trap of thinking that all in all, we are pretty good people. When we gather together as the people of God, we often act as if everything is okay, that we've got our lives under control and that whatever small or petty sin we may or may not be wrestling with is a matter between each of us and God. But we often forget that the story we've been called to embody before the world is not one where we get to be the "good guys." Jesus was crucified on account of my sins and your sins—past, present and future—and so when we gather there is little reason for pretense. We are the company of the forgiven, and yet when we gather together we often work very hard to give the impression that we are the company of those who "have it together."

But this is only half of the story. Although we work hard, at least on Sunday mornings, to give the impression that our lives are "together" and that we are generally good people, most of us don't really want to be too good the rest of the week, to live in such a way that our lives are distinctive. Indeed, we often find ourselves justifying our lack of goodness by resorting to the ever-popular slogan, "I'm only human." For Christians, democratizing goodness in this way is not an option. For us, God's desires for human life are defined by reflecting on the life of Jesus. Thus the Christian affirmation that Jesus was fully human should serve as a welcome reminder that "human" is not simply synonymous with "prone to error or sin." Rather, in the light of Jesus' life we come to realize that our problem is not that we are "only human" but that we are not human *enough*. Blaming our shortcomings on our humanity, therefore, makes a mockery not only of the life of Jesus but also of the lives of those saints throughout the ages who have sought to be human in the ways that he was human.

*Sitting in the dark.* One of the consequences of democratizing goodness is that we tend, as a result, to pay far too little attention to moral formation. If most people are for the most part already good, why bother to worry about

moral formation? In contrast, most cultures of the past have devoted considerable time and energy to the task of moral formation. In most of those cultures this moral formation was facilitated largely by identifying exemplars to be imitated and through the telling of stories. Both practices mutually reinforced each other, because stories of virtuous people made it possible to recognize them in your midst, while flesh and blood exemplars served to remind us that the most powerful stories are embodied ones. The matter of imitation will be taken up more explicitly later in this chapter; at this juncture we focus on the cultural practice of storytelling and its place in the cultivation of goodness.

In most contemporary Western cultures the important task of telling stories has largely been handed over to popular media such as television and film. The question that arises, therefore, is whether these popular media are capable of telling the kinds of stories that can contribute to our moral formation in positive ways. Or asked another way, can television and film offer us convincing portrayals of characters whose lives are marked by goodness in such a way that they can serve as exemplars of goodness? I believe the answer to this question is theoretically yes; however, I also believe that there are several powerful reasons why we should not, at least in the short run, expect this to happen very often.

First, television and film are commercial enterprises, and as such they seek to hold our attention, either in order to entertain us (which is something for which we are willing to pay) or in order to provide a ready audience for advertisers (which is something for which they are willing to pay). This means that those who are involved in this enterprise are not usually first concerned about issues of moral formation. This is not to suggest that the stories these media portray have no impact on our moral formation, but only that this is likely not their creator's first concern. Their task is to hold our attention. As it turns out, one of the easiest ways to hold our attention is to present us with portraits of darkness and evil. Although in real life goodness is often attractive and evil repulsive, these poles seem to be reversed in these worlds of unreality. What often fascinates us about the evil portrayed in television and film (and in a good deal of literature as well) is that we are allowed to brush up against



it without fear of harm. For example, though most of us would be terrified if not repulsed to be alone in the same room with "Hannibal the Cannibal" (a central character in the blockbuster film *The Silence of the Lambs*), many people find themselves strangely attracted to him when he enters our living rooms via the VCR. If popular commercial media are saturated with evil and sinister characters, this is partly because such characters more easily hold our attention.

But there is another and perhaps more interesting reason why television and film are largely populated with characters few of us want to hold up as moral exemplars. Stated bluntly: goodness is much more difficult to portray compellingly by means of a medium dominated by the visual. Audiences know firsthand that goodness is terribly difficult to live out, and so it is only interesting if people actually are embodying it, rather than simply pretending to in the realms of unreality known as television or film. Or more precisely, embodying goodness always involves a deep, internal struggle, yet television and film are poor media for exploring such struggles, not least because they offer so few engaging ways to explore human consciousness (an ability, in contrast, that literature routinely exploits to good effect). In short, most of us sense, even if unconsciously, that "being good" on television or in film is often too easy and therefore uninteresting. This, I believe, accounts for why so many "good" characters come across as flat and one-dimensional. Only if we become acquainted with them over time (either through a television series or full-length film) and are allowed to see their struggle does their goodness begin to become believable. It is worth noting that television and film are also ill-equipped to explore the genuine depths of human evil (for the same reasons listed above), but this does not handicap such portrayals nearly so much, because not understanding the motivations or intentions behind such evil often has the effect of making such evil characters more sinister and menacing and thus more capable of holding our attention.

Another reason that television and film are often populated with less-than-exemplary characters is that we seem to require ever-greater doses of evil to get the same effect, to continue to hold our interest. Therefore it should come as no surprise that television and film create darker and darker charac-

ters; indeed, actors like Dennis Hopper have made a career out of depicting warped and twisted characters. Another way to up the ante of evil and violence is to strip the story of anyone remotely good or virtuous. For example, films like *Batman* or *Speed* demonstrate that the line between heroes and villains no longer has anything to do with a person's character or his actions: everyone uses violence and deceit. Or perhaps more accurately, the "bad guys" use violence and deceit indiscriminately while the "good guys" only use it against the "bad guys."

I suppose some Christians might argue that such depictions of deep and abiding human sinfulness are quite in line with the view of human nature I have been sketching in this chapter. At one level, this is certainly true. One could reasonably argue that the unambiguous morality plays of yesteryear, with their clearly identifiable heroes and villains, did not do justice to the moral ambiguities of our lives. Yet perhaps their purpose was less to mirror our lives and more to train us to think and feel certain ways about good and evil. For example, not long ago one could recognize heroes because they would not stoop to the level of their adversaries; in contrast, the clear message of our contemporary morality plays seems to be that the only way to overcome indiscriminate evil is with clever, shrewd, discriminate evil. Within this way of thinking about the world, being "good" translates into little more than being less evil than the cinema's latest antihero. In short, "goodness" means little more than the absence of "badness."

Let me be clear: my point is not to blame television or film producers for our declining sensibilities about good and evil. Rather, Christians need to realize that if the limitations of the medium and our own fascination with evil make it easier to hold our attention with portrayals of evil, then a culture whose pervasive media are television and film will likely be surrounded with many more exemplars of evil than of good. Although television and film might provide welcome distractions, a culture that takes many of its cues about good and evil from these worlds of unreality certainly cannot contribute much to the formation of "good people." The shared cultural stories that these media offer us simply do not lend themselves to such formation. But if we cannot learn to be good by attending to the stories that circulate most widely



in our culture, what other options are there? For many people the answer is simple: if goodness is not found in the world around us, we need only look within.

*Helping ourselves.* Ironically, such a strategy is deeply rooted in our cultural heritage, grounded as it is in our culture's stories. Our society's characteristic emphasis on the individual, combined with its characteristic optimism about human persons, has created a popular movement whose effects have been far-reaching both inside and outside the church. Often referred to as the "Self-Help Movement," this movement encourages us to believe that the resolutions to our problems are only the next technique or how-to book away. Of course, this tradition of self-help is not new in this country. As far back as the mid-1800s Ralph Waldo Emerson was extolling the virtues of "self-reliance," calling people to free themselves from the limitations of tradition and to rely on their own inner resources. The human spirit, according to Emerson, has the capacity for unlimited possibilities.

This confidence in the self runs from Emerson right through to the positive thinking movement of Norman Vincent Peale and others. Such confidence in the individual—especially when combined with psychotherapist's insistence that any authority outside the self is likely a source of bondage and pathology—has produced more than one generation whose view of self is inseparable from notions of inwardness and self-realization. For these generations goodness is to be found by turning inward, and the good life (or at least a "better" life) is to be found by cultivating one's own potentialities. To look outside one's self for direction or meaning is to court frustration if not disaster; only by looking within can one hope to unlock the secrets of human existence.

If self-help ways of thinking are as pervasive as they seem to be, then we might wonder whether and to what extent they have influenced how people think about the Christian faith. Predictably, increasing numbers of people consider the Christian faith as a form of self-help, as a technique for self-improvement. Indicators of this include not only the number of "secular" self-help books being read by Christians but also the number being written by and for Christians. In fact, one might argue that there is little or no

substantive difference between self-help books written by and for Christians and those written for the general population. For example, I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter that my list of self-help titles came from two bookstores. What I did not disclose is that half of these titles were found in the self-help section of a Christian bookstore. My hunch is that most people would be unable to identify which titles were found in which bookstore. Now I admit that titles rarely tell the whole story, and we can certainly hope that Christian self-help books differ from their "secular" counterparts in significant ways, but my cursory reading in both groups suggests that they are remarkably similar.

Indeed, the more of these books I read the more I sense that the whole notion of "Christian self-help" is fundamentally misguided. Isn't "Christian self-actualization" a contradiction in terms, an oxymoron? Can we really tell the "good news" and still hold on to notions like "self-help"? A pivotal part of this gospel is the good news that we need no longer strive to help ourselves (because we cannot help ourselves enough to make any difference in God's eyes) and so are called to accept the only help that is real help—the help that God has freely offered. For this reason those Christians whose central creedal affirmation is that "God helps those who help themselves" need to reconsider their convictions in light of God's abundant grace.

If the self-help movement has likely influenced the way we think of the Christian faith, it has also likely impacted the way we think of ourselves. I suspect, for example, that the pervasiveness of this movement has made it increasingly difficult for our churches to talk about sin. Much of popular psychology, as well as the self-help movement, insists that talking about sin leads to debilitating guilt and other destructive pathologies. What people need is not to be told that they are sinners, but to be affirmed and accepted, to be encouraged to reach their potential. Thus in place of sermons that would help us name our sins we have positive-thinking sermons, and in place of sermons that would remind us of our need for Christ, we have "feel good" sermons that invite us to develop and rely on our own potentialities. This temptation—to substitute what people want to hear for what God wants to tell us—is hardly new. For example, Timothy is admonished about the



necessity of proclaiming God's message regardless of whether his listeners desire to hear it or not:

In the presence of God and of Jesus Christ, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. (2 Tim 4:1-4)

### Cultivating Goodness

The New Testament suggests that the people of God are called to be a light in the midst of a dark world—a "city on a hill" to their non-Christian neighbors. Although the New Testament is clear that such relative goodness in no way puts us in better stead with God, it does suggest that such goodness might serve to point our neighbors to something beyond ourselves. Thus goodness is other-directed in two ways. First, because we are not ourselves the standard of goodness, we take our cues about goodness from that Other who alone is truly good. And second, our capacity to reflect God's goodness both comes from God and is designed to draw others to God. This ability of God's reflected goodness to draw others to God is testified to in Scripture several times. For example, in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus admonishes his followers to "let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (Mt 5:16). Paul urges the Philippians to "do all things without murmuring and arguing so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world" (Phil 2:14-15). In a similar way Peter admonishes his fellow Christians to live honorable lives, even though some of their practices will likely be misunderstood: "Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers,

they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge" (1 Pet 2:11-12).

*Learning to name our sin.* Even though God calls us to live lives of goodness, part of our ongoing story is that we repeatedly fail to do so. This is why it is imperative for Christian churches to incorporate into their weekly worship a period of confession. This has been an important practice of the church for centuries, and yet it is becoming less popular in the age of self-help and feel-good religion. We are not the ones who have it all together, and our worship should testify to this. Coming into the presence of our holy and perfect God should make us more mindful than ever of our rebelliousness and hard-heartedness. Each of us should be encouraged to confess not merely our generic sinfulness, but our specific sins. Healing requires accurate diagnosis; a doctor who told us we were generically sick would impress none of us. Yet many of us shy away from naming (or having named for us) the sins that so easily and frequently entangle us.

As important as personal confession is, the church desperately needs to encourage confession beyond the individual level. The people of God need to be able to confess together that they have not been the kind of community that they have been called to be in their specific time and place. Confessing as a church will no doubt be more difficult, not least because such confession presumes the existence of a corporate identity, something that many churches lack. Or said another way, we will not be able to confess as a church the ways in which we have failed as a church until we understand what it means to be the church. Here again we bump up against the centrality of purpose for understanding identity. Until we better understand God's purposes for the church, we will not be able to confess specifically the ways in which we have failed to embody those purposes.

*Attending to God's voice.* Fortunately God has not left us bereft of resources to understand those purposes. One of the most important of those resources throughout the history of the church has been the preaching of the word of God. Certainly this is not the only way that the word of God can come to God's people, but God's people gathered together to hear and discern a word from God remains a central and defining practice of the church. Here, God



addresses us not simply individually, but corporately as well.

There is, of course, a proper place for personal reflection on Scripture, but the abuses to which such study is open within a culture that fosters hyper-individualism are many. For example, it is easy in a culture obsessed with individualism to believe that the most determinative way to read Scripture is by oneself. But we are never truly alone when we are reading; rather, we are always reading in the company of other voices that are shaping our readings in crucial ways. Thus one of the central questions that Christians must always ask themselves is this: With whom are we reading Scripture? Which of the myriad voices around us are influencing our reading of Scripture? Unfortunately, we are never urged to ask such questions when we are under the illusion that we are reading Scripture "alone."

In a culture that teaches us that what we take to be our own personal interpretations are just as legitimate as anyone else's, the church needs a time and a place where we discern together what God has to say. We need a time and place where we can inquire together concerning which voices have truly captured our attention. Obviously there is no guarantee that a clear word from God will be either preached or heard during any gathering. Nevertheless, I suspect that whether such a word is preached or heard at any given gathering has less to do with whether God has anything to tell us and more to do with whether the parties involved (preacher and congregants) come with the expectation that God's presence will be manifested and God's voice heard.

Christians throughout history have firmly believed that preaching and teaching had to involve more than simply offering personal advice or wisdom. The word of God proclaimed must have some connection to the word of God written. That we expect those who proclaim the Word to do more than simply read from Scripture suggests that we believe God's message to us will involve more than the words of Scripture; most Christians, however, do not think that it can involve less than that. And although there is no doubt that the word of God frequently brings a word of encouragement, it often brings a word of judgment and admonition. This is not because God is not a God of encouragement, but because God understands what we most need and given our inclination to sin, what we often need is correction. Hear again one of

the passages of Scripture that is frequently quoted by conservative and evangelical Christians:

All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work. (2 Tim 3:16-17)

Sometimes debates about these verses have so focused on the character of inspiration that we have forgotten what these verses claim is the function of Scripture: to teach, reprove, correct and train in righteousness. Presumably, the object of such reproof and correction is not simply our neighbors—who we routinely assume to be in error—but also us. I suppose that if we found it easy or natural to desire what God desires, then we would have much less reason to need God's word, either in its embodied, written or proclaimed forms. But given our penchant for wanting things our own way, we need to be reminded constantly of God's ways. Gathering each week with the expectation that God has something important to tell us as a congregation is crucial to our being able to cultivate God's goodness in our lives.

*Imitating the saints.* Simply hearing repeatedly what God wants of us is not enough. As important as hearing the word of God is, knowing how to respond is equally important. Indeed, it may be that many of us know in our heads quite well what God expects of us; what we lack is the ability to translate this knowledge into daily action. This is why God has not only given us Scripture to guide us but also other Christians to imitate. In fact, there may be a much closer connection between these two resources than we have often realized. The verses that precede the famous Timothy passage quoted above, though less-often cited, are no less important:

Now you have observed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions and suffering the things that happened to me in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra. What persecutions I endured! Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. Indeed, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. But wicked people and imposters will go from bad to worse, deceiving others and being deceived. But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing



from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. (2 Tim 3:10-15)

Timothy is encouraged not only to ponder what he has learned but also to remember from whom he has learned it. At first glance, this may appear to be a simple power play: "Ponder what you learned and take it to heart, because I taught you and I'm in charge." But Timothy is not simply urged to obey those in authority; rather, he is reminded of the authority of embodied witness. In short, Timothy is asked to remember what gives the writer authority: Timothy has observed his teaching, conduct, aim in life, faith, patience, love, steadfastness, persecutions and sufferings. In other words, Timothy was not simply taught what to believe, but was also clearly shown what difference any of it makes for how one lives. This was why the *what* that he learned and the *from whom* he learned it could not be easily separated.

Thus, learning to live a Christian life requires not simply learning the right words, but learning how to embody a way of life. As the letter to the Hebrews urges, "Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith" (Heb 13:7). John writes, "Beloved, do not imitate what is evil but imitate what is good. Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God" (3 Jn 11). Or as Paul reminds the Thessalonians, the persuasive power of the gospel message was inseparable from the way Paul and other Christians lived before them, a way of life that the Thessalonians took to heart and imitated:

For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the world with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. (1 Thess 1:4-7)

Many of us would like to keep the Christian faith out of the imitation business, for we rightly sense the dangers of imitating other people. Or more

precisely while many of us are comfortable with the idea of imitating Christ, few of us feel at ease with imitating our fellow pilgrims, and even fewer of us are comfortable with people imitating us. But there is no way around it, for we only know what it means to imitate Christ as we see other people following Christ in this way rather than that way. Moreover, the issue is not *whether* people will imitate us—they already do whether we like it or not—but whether they will be led to imitate *Christ* by imitating us. In other words, it is not an either/or decision, a matter of following Christ or following fallible people; it is a matter of following fallible people who are empowered by the Holy Spirit to follow Christ.

This is why Paul writes, "I appeal to you, then, be imitators of me. For this reason I sent to you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ Jesus, as I teach them everywhere in every church" (1 Cor 4:16-17). Later on in the same letter he writes, "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ" (1 Cor 11:1). Prior to the selection from Ephesians with which I began this chapter, Paul urges his hearers to be "imitators of God" (Eph 5:1). Given the quite specific exhortations that Paul offers before and after this admonition, Paul in no way considers being "imitators of God" to be an abstract exercise. Imitating God or Christ or Paul may be difficult, but it is hardly abstract. What are needed are concrete embodied examples of what such imitating looks like.

The problem is that many contemporary Christians mistakenly believe that learning to follow Christ is analogous to learning how to use a new computer program. What is required is little more than the patience to decipher the manual and the ability to follow written directions. However, learning how to follow Christ is less like learning how to use a new computer program and more like learning how to swing a baseball bat. The latter is a kind of skill that you learn primarily by imitation. You can certainly learn something about swinging a bat by reading books about it and by watching others do it, but most people don't learn to swing a bat this way. Most learn by having someone who is willing to stand behind them, to place their hands on the bat along with their own and to go through the awkward yet necessary movement of swinging the bat. The reason they can have confidence that they



are doing it right, even though it doesn't feel right, is that someone who knows how to do it better than they do is doing it with them and guiding their movements.

Many of us could learn a great deal about how to live the Christian life more faithfully from those saints around us if we were but willing to acknowledge that they know how to do some things better than we do. Granted, they still have their flaws and they will continue to falter, just as we will. But perhaps we can also learn something important about the Christian life from their response to their failures, as well as to their victories. Paul knew better than anyone that he was far from perfect; nevertheless, this foremost of sinners repeatedly instructed his fellow Christians to imitate him. Dangerous advice, most assuredly, but perhaps no more dangerous than leaving each of us to decide for ourselves what following Christ should look like. Perhaps once again we are in a position to hear an oft-quoted passage with fresh ears:

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence [*aretē*] and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you. (Phil 4:8-9)

### Reflection Questions and Practical Suggestions

Confession, preaching, imitation. These are three important activities we need to recover if God is going to cultivate goodness in the life of the church. Each of these three requires frank admissions for which the self-help movement in no way prepares us. First, we are sinners before God who need to name those sins. Second, because we do not have what is necessary to help ourselves, we need a vision of the good beyond ourselves. Finally, we need not only a vision of the good, but concrete exemplars to imitate. Given that the recovery of these three crucial practices will not come overnight, where might we begin?

□ Reflect on these practices in light of your own fears. Why are we afraid to confess our sins to one another? Are we afraid that people would not love us

if they really knew what we were like? Is this why we expend such enormous energy constructing and maintaining façades that we hope will lead people to believe that we have our lives together? But if the gospel is about God reaching out to us because our lives were (and are) such a mess, shouldn't we—of all people—be able to gather together without the pretense of being something we are not?

Why do we devote so little time during our corporate gatherings to discerning whether or not we have heard a clear word of God? Is it because such discernment would be difficult, messy and time-consuming? Or are we also afraid that if we were to risk such discernments, and we were to acknowledge that we had heard such a word, then we would have little excuse for not responding? In other words, is our refusal to discern whether we have heard a word from God really a thinly veiled strategy for endlessly deferring the necessity of responding in obedience?

Why are we afraid to make a concerted effort to imitate other Christians or have them imitate us? Is it simply because we recognize the potential danger of such imitating, recognizing that other people are as capable of leading us astray as we are of them? Or is it also because we would rather not take responsibility for the way other Christians are already imitating us, even if we've never given them permission to do so? It seems that by refusing to acknowledge the ways in which imitation is already taking place, even if haphazardly, we continue to underwrite the charade that our Christian life is a strictly private affair. Moreover, by sidestepping the matter of imitation, we are allowed the luxury of simply admiring other Christians without pondering whether we are being called to live more like them and hence more like Christ. Perhaps this helps explain why exemplars like Mother Teresa are more often admired than imitated.

These are likely only some of the debilitating fears that plague us. As you strive to be honest about these and others you may have, try to focus less on these fears and more on the potential for confession, preaching and imitation to be avenues of God's grace. As you do so, consider taking one of the following baby steps, or another that seems more appropriate given your own circumstances.



□ If it is not already present, encourage those in leadership to include during worship a period of confession, both individual and corporate. This will likely be most difficult at the corporate level, but stumbling to articulate our joint failings as a congregation or parish will likely go some way toward instilling a necessary sense of corporate identity.

For too long, Protestants have abandoned the importance of Christian confession because of abuses in the past. But contrary to the privatistic way to most of us have come to think of our sin, James encourages his hearers to “confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed” (Jas 5:16). As long as we continue to think of our sin as simply a private matter between each of us and God, we continue to cut ourselves off from one of the resources God has given to the church for our healing. With this in mind consider asking a close Christian friend if you may confess your sins in his or her presence. Pray together about those sins and be willing to be held accountable for your repentance.

□ Determine that you will seek more diligently to hear God’s voice. This might take several different forms, but I often wonder what would happen if the people of God began to take preaching more seriously. What if we really expected God to speak to us? Perhaps we should begin by doing a better job of preparing our hearts and minds each week to receive God’s word. What do we do to prepare to hear God? Perhaps our own lack of expectation and preparation is closely tied to our lack of reception: we have not heard God because we did not come expecting to hear God. In addition, we can probably do a better job of letting those charged with proclaiming the word of God know that we expect nothing less. Those so charged are often hesitant to proclaim the full counsel of God because they sense that those gathered do not want to hear it. We need to remind them that we have come not to hear what *we* want to hear but what *God* wants us to hear. How many times have we dropped our pastors a line thanking them for speaking a word of God to us? I suspect that if we did this more often, many ministers—reminded that we are listening attentively to their words for the voice of God—would take the task of preaching even more seriously than they currently do.

□ Consider seeking out more public ways of responding to God’s word.

When I was a child and my mother or father spoke to me, they expected a response, for it was in such a response that they could discern whether or not I had really heard them. They did not speak merely because they liked the sound of their voices; they spoke because they thought I needed to hear them and to respond appropriately. Likewise, if we come expecting to hear God’s word and we do hear it, might not God rightly expect us to respond in some way? And shouldn’t this response take a form that goes beyond each of us responding in our own way, oblivious to how others are responding? Or asked another way, if God’s word to us really is a word to *us* (and not just a word to each of us individually who just happen to be in the same place), then shouldn’t at least part of our response take a corporate form? Why is it that the “application” portion of the sermon almost always gives suggestions for how this message might affect *me*, but rarely for how it should affect *us*? If nothing else, aren’t we as a congregation responsible for discerning whether the message we have heard is from God or not? What kind of forum do we need to test these spirits, to discern if they are of God? I fear that congregations all over the country have been unwittingly trained not to respond to the word of God because no opportunity for corporate response is offered. For most of us, we simply hear (or don’t hear) the word of God, go home for the week and then come back to hear (or not hear) the following week. What is the point of this? Perhaps we should begin by devoting time each week to asking some questions of each other. Have we heard the word of God or not? What was that word specifically? And what should our response as a congregation be to that word? I could be wrong, but my sense is that such a practice would radically transform not only the way we listen to the word of God, but also the way we embody our life together.

□ With regard to imitation, ask God to give you the courage to ask a person in your congregation whom you respect if you can “hang out” with them occasionally. We need opportunities to see what such people’s lives look like day to day. What challenges do they face and how do they meet them? Similarly, consider encouraging a younger person in the faith to look over your shoulder, not because you have the Christian life down pat, but because you rightly sense there is no other way of learning how to embody a life marked by goodness.



□ In addition to the practice of imitating a fellow flesh-and-blood pilgrim—or as a temporary alternative for those not yet ready to take up such a practice—we would do well to immerse ourselves in the stories of the saints across the centuries. If Christians are to resist having their imaginations stunted by the relatively narrow repertoire of stories circulated by the dominant culture, we will need to recover and begin circulating among ourselves a much wider set of stories. The stories of the people of God across time and space are capable not only of inspiring us by reminding us of God's goodness and faithfulness, but they are also capable of enriching our parochial notions of God's goodness and God's desires of and for us. Hence, those who seek to have the fruit of goodness cultivated in their lives would do well to immerse themselves in the stories of those Christian saints across time and space whose lives have already borne this fruit. By allowing such "good seed" to be sown in our hearts and imaginations, we take an important and necessary first step toward allowing the fruit of goodness to be cultivated in our own lives.

*Do not be deceived, God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh, but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit. So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith. (Gal 6:7-10)*

## EIGHT

### Cultivating Faithfulness in the Midst of Impermanence

*But as for that [seed] in the good soil, these are the ones who, when they hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance. (Lk 8:15)*

*Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. (Heb 10:23)*

**T**he story has been repeated so many times that we know it almost by heart. The group began in 1990 with seventy men and a football coach. The following year 4,200 men attended the first official rally. In 1992 over five times that many came, and the next year 50,000 men packed into a single stadium in Denver, Colorado. In 1994 the rallies spread to seven stadiums around the country, with attendance topping 275,000. This phenomenal growth continued during the next three years, with attendance at twenty-four stadium rallies in 1997 reaching 1.25 million.

Whatever one thinks of the Promise Keepers movement, their growth during the early 1990s was nothing short of phenomenal. The movement also worked hard to get racial reconciliation on the agenda of many churches that had long ignored the implications of the gospel for that area of their lives.