

Coach House Church BEACONS

GRASPING GODS GOODNESS

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My current job is working with children who have special needs and challenging behaviours. Many of them have had to leave mainstream schools at least in part due to behaviour, even if their academic ability isn't too bad. Over time, I've noticed that one of the most important techniques in getting the children to live and work well is to discover something that motivates them. Oftentimes, the class team and I have escalated punishments for bad behaviour to little effect. The result is often even worse behaviour with disregard for the consequences. A miserable child, who can't get what they want, without anything good and enjoyable to look forwards too – is just going to stay miserable. However, the moment we find something they love and enjoy, whether it's cakes on Friday afternoon or time dedicated to drawing buses, we have an immediate motivator which curbs behaviour and gives them a reason to do their work.

In a similar way, as Christians, attempts to curb the equivalent of bad behaviour will always, eventually fail if we don't know and experience the goodness of God which motivates us to live for him and enjoy him.

There are many scriptures that warn and encourage us to abandon sin for the sake of knowing and seeing God, which brings its own reward and many other rewards as well – I often think of passages such as 'blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God', or 'blessed is the one who endures temptation...'

Seeing God and being blessed are objectively good things, but they often don't appeal to us. Quoting these things to ourselves is helpful when we face temptation but we must see the underlying reasons why we should avoid sin – to experience fullness of life with God instead. To know we are blessed and experience that blessedness. However, we often hear our feelings and experiences very loudly over the words of scripture, even if we know them to be true.

One response to this problem is just to shout a little louder. We might drown out our misgivings if we say with our voices that God is good. This is valuable, and sometimes in the heat of the moment it saves from a particular sin. However, it's easy to leave it at that, and not deal with the issues at their root and reflect on those passages more deeply. It removes the symptoms but doesn't cure the disease.

However, God wants us to see his goodness and enjoy life with him at the very centre of it.

The letter of James tells us this in chapter 1:16:

“16 Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. 17 Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.”

First of all, what's the deception? We are deceived when we think that God is not the source of all goodness and is not good to us. Earlier in the chapter James addresses some people's concern that it was God who tempts us. He argues this is wrong, and that it is our desires which tempt us into sin. If God actively tempted us, we'd question whose side he was really on. Thinking that God tempts us can come from a suspicion that he does not really have our best interests at heart, and that he's there to trip us up.

James uses the images of light and shadow to further describe God. Every good thing and little 'light' that we receive comes from God, 'the father of lights'. Far from tempting anyone to sin, ultimately, every good thing comes from him.

This is emphasised more as James develops the example. 'There is no shadow or variation due to change' with God. He is like a more perfect version of the sun which is always shining, in which there is absolutely no shadow. If we find ourselves in shadow, it's not because he has changed or because he is inconsistent – rather, we are. Only light comes from him the light source. Only good comes from him, the source of all good. So, what's our problem?

Good doesn't always seem good. Core desires for money, sex and power often seem to be left unfulfilled by God and we are constantly tempted to fulfil them our own way – We want money to be comfortable so we gamble or selfishly overwork because we believe that God can't (or won't) provide. We rush into relationships that aren't good because we want affection and acceptance which we think God won't give us. We manipulate others and try to bring them down and elevate

ourselves to gain respect and recognition because we don't think God values us enough.

We need God to open our eyes to his goodness, or we won't see it. We want to fix things with a series of steps, but ultimately our hope is God revealing his beauty, glory, goodness and everything else to us in a way that changes our hearts and perspectives so that our many disappointments and troubles fall across this backdrop, rather than becoming the centre and totality of our experience. So how does God communicate the reality of his goodness towards us so that we can take it in and understand it, so that it changes our hearts and lives? It is through the Holy Spirit. He is an "advocate to help you and be with you forever – 17 the Spirit of truth. (as described in John 14:16-17). In 1 Timothy 1:7, Paul reminds us that we have received "a spirit of power, love and self-discipline" not timidity. Rest assured that whatever we are facing we have the power to overcome it with Gods help.

So I want to offer 5 short points below, which help us to kickstart this journey of trusting God.

Locate your discontent and acknowledge it to God

Sharing your problems and joys is a part of any authentic relationship and it is the same with God - as we voice our lack of contentment, he may begin to highlight in our minds his goodness in our situation, or his perspective on events that helps us to see his goodness. This is how we begin, engaging God with the problems we are experiencing.

See what God has to say about it in the Bible

The Bible is the essential foundation that tells us who God is. If a specific issue or sin is bothering us, it benefits us to look at what the Bible has to say about it so that we have something solid to stand on. That gives us a good basis for our prayers and worship as we realise who God is and what he's offering us.

Spend time in worship and prayer

Romans 12:1 – describes what worship is: offering ourselves, our lives and our preferences to God like a living sacrifice. This notably happens in our prayers and sung worship, corporately with other believers, and individually too. When we spend time worshipping, we engage our emotions and open ourselves up to God so that he can shape our hearts and our minds. With Gods help, this will begin to change us.

Spend time with other believers

The previous three suggestions happen best with the input, prayer, advice and help of other believers. This is challenging at the moment, but it could just be a phonecall with a friend, messaging each other, or taking a walk in the park. This helps us get out of our own heads and see things from God's perspective.

Remember that it all depends on God

Finally, and most importantly, none of this happens without God's help. It is thoroughly impossible. Ultimately God, in his goodness, promises to change us by the power of his spirit and he will do just that – as we allow him.

So I pray this for us from Ephesians 3:16-21

I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, 17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, 18 may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, 19 and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. 20 Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, 21 to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.



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