

Shine Through Goodness
Making the Best of Babylon
September 18, 2016

PRELUDE – Alleluia He Has Loved Us
Worship Songs – Alleluia / Build Your
Kingdom Here

Announcements / Intro – Shannon
Feature – Humble & Kind / Offering

Good morning, everyone.

As Shannon said, today we're beginning a new series ... which is actually the *ending* of a *mega-series* (a series of series) which we've been calling *Shine* and which we began way back in the second week of May. And our purpose in this mega-series of series has been pretty simple. We've tried to stay focused on one thing:

How do we put into practice what Jesus told his very first followers when He said:

“You are the light of the world—like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden ... Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.” Matthew 5:14,16 (NIV)

What does that mean? What does it look like for a Christian and for a church to “let your light shine” individually and collectively?

To this point we’ve identified four character qualities have the effect of bringing light into the darkness of our culture; four traits and behaviors (“good

deeds” Jesus called them) that typically produce astonishment in people who do not know Jesus; astonishment that leads them to say “*no one* lives like that. Help me understand why you attempt to do so.”

Generosity, we discovered in the month of May, is the premeditated, calculated, designated emancipation of personal financial assets to the people and causes God loves.

And generosity is not the same as “giving” because everybody in this culture gives at least something some of the time because everybody can be motivated or “guilted” into “giving” whenever there’s a need. Lots of people engage in random acts of giving.

But people who are truly generous follow

- a well-thought-out plan (it’s

premeditated)

- for when and how much they're going to give (it's calculated)
- and to what or whom they will give (it's designate).

It's a part of their lifestyle and it's radically countercultural.

In the month of June, we talked about ...

Graciousness, which is the unconditional predisposition to treat “them” (those who *are* not like us or who do *not* like us) better than they deserve because that's how we have been treated by God.

Gracious people never forget that they are sinners who constantly fail God and fall short of His intentions for their lives and yet God constantly treats them far better

than they deserve.

“God proves his love for us in this,” the Apostle Paul writes: “that while we were still sinners, Jesus gave his life to atone for our sin.”

And because of that, gracious people have made up their minds (they’re predisposed) that they are going to treat those who are not like them or who do *not* like them ... we’re going to treat “them” better than they deserve (which is grace).

And we’re going to do it *no matter what*, with no strings attached. We are unconditionally predisposed.

And then in July we talked about the third characteristic ...

God-centeredness ... which, we learned, is the humble, accountable, obedient and dependent submission to the Supreme Being in the Universe (God).

And the reason this characteristic is so unique is that almost everyone in this culture *believes* in God but very few are actually God-centered.

- A God-centered person knows that “it’s all about Thee and not about me.” (They are humble).
- That everything I have is ultimately Thine and not Mine. (So they are accountable).
- A God-centered person believes that *what God says* trumps what we and our culture think is “right.” (So they are obedient)

- And a God-centered person knows that the power to be and do what God wants them to be and do is not all up to them but from the Holy Spirit. (They are dependent).

Then in August, we talked about taking a step beyond “lighting” to “inviting”; to making it possible for others to know God like we know God.

And we called that characteristic “Gospel-drivenness” – the motivation to spread the Good News (the Gospel) through the charitable, strategic, and determined investment of personal resources.

Gospel-driven people are not trying to show that they’re right and everyone else is wrong. They just want others to have what they have (which is the literal meaning of

“charitable”).

And Gospel-driven people understand that “CHURCH” is the primary outreach strategy in God’s plan. So, they find and join a church where they invest their time, talent and financial treasure and do it together with other followers of Jesus. (They are strategic).

Finally, Gospel-driven people know that not everyone will believe the Good News and that even some of those who appear to believe will at some point fall away.

But they do not let that discourage them because Jesus didn’t bat 1.0000 either and He wasn’t discouraged. So they keep investing and inviting, too. (They are determined).

Now, that's what we've been talking about for the past four months and I truly hope that this has been helpful for you, especially if you're a Christian. I hope that it has helped you get a vision for the kinds of things that actually produce light in a dark world.

I also hope that this has been helpful for anyone here who is not a Christian; someone who has been "sitting in the shadows" (so to speak) and just listening and observing. I hope that maybe what we've talked about has served to give you an accurate biblical picture of the kind of life that Christians are *supposed* to be living because God knows (literally), too many times we fail at that. And because we *do* fail,

we end up projecting a warped image of what believing in and following Jesus is supposed to be about.

So I hope that, if you're not a Christian, maybe you understand a little bit more that Christianity lived-as-it-should-be is about things like generosity, graciousness, God-centeredness and being motivated to share the Gospel with others and, as we'll see in just a few minutes, *goodness*. And I hope that, as you understand, you will eventually say "yes" to believing in Jesus and that you'll begin to follow Him with us.

Now, before we move on, just a quick reminder that if you missed any of the messages in these four *Shine* series, you can watch, listen to or read them on our app or our website.

We've also created a refrigerator magnet to go along with each characteristic and you can pick them up for free in the vestibule on the way out.

Defining Goodness

So, let's talk about *goodness*.

And to kick things off, I have a few questions for you to think about concerning the song the band did a few minutes ago.

1. Why would someone exhort their kids to “always stay humble and kind” – instead of encouraging them, for example, to “always stay narcissistic and mean?”

2. Why do we consider it desirable to say “please” and “thank you” and not to steal, cheat and lie?

3. Why do we think that someone who has achieved their dreams ought to “turn back around and help the next one in line?”

Now, those are not meant to be trick questions. The answer – at least, what I’m trying to get at – is pretty simple and straightforward.

- *It’s because we believe that life goes better for everyone when we live that way.*
- It’s because you tend to feel better about yourself.
- It’s because a humble-and-kind,

please-and-thank-you, help-somebody-else approach to life leads to personal well-being and to the well-being of everyone around us.

And, deep down, that's really what all of us want. In fact, that's what we were created to experience as beings made in the image of God.

Of course, even though everyone *wants* it, few people actually *live* that way these days. We've talked about it ad nauseum in recent months so I won't go in to it again, but just look at the behavior of our Presidential candidates and the campaign process and the news media. And then look at how *nationwide* everyone is taking sides and getting into flame wars on Facebook and Twitter and everywhere else.

So, whenever someone goes against the grain and lives a life characterized by *goodness* – which is what this song is describing (at least in part) – it’s like a light comes on in the darkness. It stands out. It shines. And people are drawn to it.

That’s why, I think, that particular song (which was released by Tim McGraw back in January) rocketed to number one on the country music charts in April and May. And the video that went with the song won “Video of the Year” at the 2016 CMT Music Awards. *When people see goodness exemplified, they are drawn to it ...*

... which is why I’ve included it as one of the “five Gs” in this series.

So, with that said, let me give you the definition we're going to be working off of in this series.

But I should tell you up front that the way I'm going to define it isn't how most people tend to connect "goodness" and Christianity in their minds.

I've told this story before on several occasions so I apologize if you've already heard it but, when I became a Christian in high school and joined a church and got involved in the youth group, one of the "rules" I picked up along the way (though no one ever phrased it like this) was "Rick, if you want to be a *good* Christian, don't smoke, drink or chew or run with the girls who do."

And I took that seriously and I don't regret it. It turned out to be great advice and saved me from a lot of trouble I could have gotten myself into.

Unfortunately, however, it also stunted my vision and my growth and even my usefulness to God because "goodness" to me became more about what you *don't* do than by what you *do* do. Goodness basically came down to *avoiding badness* (or sin).

And I don't think I'm not alone in that experience because, for a lot of Christians, that's what they've been taught and how they think ... which is why a lot of people who *aren't* Christians believe that's what Christians and Christianity are all about. "Christians have to live a very rigid and dull life," they think, "lest they wind up

doing something bad.”

Goodness, in that kind of thinking, is passive. It’s all about avoiding “the bad.”

Not that “the bad” *shouldn’t* be avoided – it should be – but the “goodness” that God has in mind for those who know Jesus and follow Him is so much more than that.

The Apostle Paul puts it like this in his letter to the churches at Ephesus.

We are God’s masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago. Ephesians 2:10 (NLT)

Paul is reminding those believers (and us) that when we turn to Jesus in faith and repentance and ask Him to be our Savior,

we're spiritually "born from above" by the power of the Holy Spirit into the Kingdom of God. We become new people in God's sight.

But that's *not an ending point* where we just kind of sit around and wait until Jesus comes back or we die and "just try not to mess up too much." Instead, it's a starting point of a life of "doing good things," Paul writes.

Goodness isn't passive. It's active. It results in *doing* not in not doing.

So, with that in mind, now I'll give you the definition.

Goodness is "energized faith" expressing itself in acts of love and service for the benefit of others.

<repeat>

How about this time, you read it with me,
OK?

Here we go: *goodness is “energized faith”
expressing itself in acts of love and service for
the benefit of others.*

Now, I know that some of you are thinking
“where’d you get that definition, Rick? Did
you just make it up like you did some of the
other ones?”

Nope – not this time. This definition is
actually rooted in the Greek word that gets
translated “goodness” on several occasions
in the New Testament.

**And that word is “a-gatho-su-ne”
which means “goodness for the**

benefit of others, not simply for the sake of being virtuous.”ⁱ

Agathosune isn't about avoiding bad behavior; agathosune isn't about “being of high-moral character” internally.

Agathosune is virtue and holiness in action which has the effect of blessing others. It's our faith in Christ energized and coming out of us in acts of love and service for the benefit of others ...

... which is exactly in line with what the Apostle James had in mind when he wrote:

“Faith” by itself isn't enough. Unless it produces good deeds, it is dead and useless. James 2:17 (NLT)

The Gospel of Mark provides us with a great

illustration of what agathosune looks like – of what the difference is between “goodness for the benefit of others” and “goodness for the sake of being personally virtuous.”

If you’ve been around church for any length of time, I’m sure you’ve heard this story. It’s in chapter 10 beginning in verse 17.

Now as Jesus was starting out on his way, someone ran up to him, fell on his knees, and said, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.”

Lots of talk about “goodness” here. Hmmm

...

Jesus continues:

“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.’”

In other words, “don’t do the bad stuff.” Jesus is talking about the way that most religious people define goodness which is primarily about being personally virtuous.

And what the guy then says to Jesus is shocking.

The man said to him, “Teacher, I have wholeheartedly obeyed all these laws since my youth.”

Wow!

I don't know anyone who can honestly say they have never done any of the bad stuff. I don't know anyone who can say, truthfully, that their internal moral character and their personal virtue is without fault. If I heard someone say what this guy said, I would say, "no way." No one I know is *that* good.

But Jesus believed him. In fact, Mark tells us that ...

As Jesus looked at him, he felt love for him ...

... because, I think, that kind of avoidance of sin is so rare among people and, obviously, the guy really did take God and His word seriously.

But *true* goodness, complete goodness –

agathosune kind of goodness – goes beyond that to action which blesses and benefits others ...

**... which is why Jesus then says,
“since we’re talking about goodness
let me point out to you that ...**

“You lack one thing. Go, sell whatever you have and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

Now, a lot of people get all hung up on that statement as if Jesus wants everyone to sell everything and give it all to the poor.

But that’s not what this conversation is about. And we know that because the Gospel writers tells us that Jesus had lots of rich friends to whom He never said

anything like this. Now, He did exhort them to *be generous* – to emancipate their personal financial assets to the people and causes God loves in ways that are premeditated, calculated and designated instead of random. But He never said anything this radical to them.

Why not? Because Jesus was trying to make a point about how this guy (and many of us) defined goodness.

Basically, our “high bar” is too low, which is why Mark tells us that ...

... at this statement, the man looked sad and went away sorrowful, for he was very rich.

Mark 10:17-22 (NET)

And it would be a huge step from his level of sin-avoidance virtue (which, apparently,

even Jesus thought was pretty good by human standards) to the kind of virtue that gladly blesses and benefits others.

And he couldn't make that jump. He was good but he wasn't *that* good. He wasn't "100% agathosune good."

Of course, *no one is* – which is yet another confirmation that we all fall short of the glorious intentions that God has for our lives and that we're all sinners in need of a savior. "Sin" – which literally means falling short and missing the mark – isn't just about doing "the bad stuff."

It's also about not doing the good stuff ... which is why this guy needed to admit his sinfulness to Jesus as much as the tax collectors and prostitutes who Jesus hung

out with and why even the most pure and pious person you know (and maybe that's you!) needs to do that, too.

But that's a topic for another day.

Our purpose this morning is to illustrate the difference between the kind of goodness that merely avoids the bad stuff and *agathosune* – virtue and holiness in action which blesses others ... which, again, is why we're defining goodness in this way: *“energized faith” expressing itself in acts of love and service for the benefit of others.*

More Than “Services”

Of course, the question is what does that look like in real life?

Well, we've already heard one example of it in the song – “always be humble and kind.” Nothing wrong with that!

But remember, for those of us who are Christians, this is about being light in a dark world. This is about goodness with a purpose of helping people see the goodness of God so that they are drawn to Him.

There's an intentionality about it – an intentionality that is not only meant to play out on an individual basis (“*you personally* be humble and kind to others because God has been humble and kind to you personally”) but, also, an intentionality that is meant to play out *collectively* as followers of Jesus band together in little communities of faith all over the world called “churches.”

In fact that very word itself – *church* – actually carries with it the idea of a group of people impacting their community with goodness. And this is something I learned just in the past few months as we’ve been doing this series and I’ve been dying to share this with you because it really does help us see the bigger picture of what God is up to in this world and, therefore, what God wants us to be up to.

The Greek word that gets translated *church* over and over in the New Testament is *ecclesia*.

For example, Jesus once said ...

“I will build my church [ecclesia], and all the powers of hell will not conquer it.”

Matthew 16:18 (NLT)

For example, Paul says that when Jesus was raised from the dead ...

God put all things under Christ's feet, and he gave him to the church [ecclesia] as head over all things. Now the church [ecclesia] is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. Ephesians 1:22-23 (NET).

The Greek word that gets translated *church* over and over in the New Testament is *ecclesia*. Would you say that with me? *Ecclesia*.

Now you can show off and tell people you know two Greek words – *agathosune* and *ecclesia*!

Ok, so here's what's so cool about *ecclesia*ⁱⁱ - what you and I are part of if we say this is our church.

What I've heard and believed for all of my Christian life (and many of you have heard it, too), is that *ecclesia* in the Greek simply means "an assembly" or "a gathering" which means, therefore, that church is simply an assembly or gathering of people who believe in and follow Jesus. That's why we come together to worship every Sunday. That's why some of us gather together in the middle of the week in small groups.

But if you look back at how the Greeks themselves used that word, it's apparent that *ecclesia* meant *a lot more than that*. In fact, they had a half-dozen *other words* that

better described a simple assembly or gathering. So, if that's all that Jesus and Paul and other writers had in mind when speaking of the church, they could have used any of those.

But they didn't. They chose *ecclesia* ... a word that, in the way the Greeks typically used it, had a distinctly *political aspect* to it and a word that had *zero religious connotation*. At the time of Jesus and of Paul, *ecclesia* was the word used to describe the gathering and function of *the elders* – *the chief influencers* – of a community.

The way it worked was that these local elders – the *ecclesia* – would meet on a regular basis to discuss the issues facing the community; issues such as neighborhood disputes, arguments over estates of

deceased persons, and how they would collectively respond to natural disasters.

So, big picture, an ecclesia was the gathering of wise community leaders brought together by their common vision for the harmony and well-being of the wider community.

Alan Hirsch (who is an adjunct professor at Fuller Seminary) writes that ...

“Ecclesia in this sense, was a community-within-a-community whose very purpose was to add value to that larger community.”

“The ecclesia brought wisdom to the village,” he writes. “The ecclesia helped the village be a better village” ...

... which reminds me of a fascinating story in the Old Testament.

When In Babylon

For 40 years, the prophet Jeremiah had warned the southern kingdom of the nation of Israel that unless they changed their ways, God was going to judge them. They would be invaded by King Nebuchadnezzar and taken off to Babylon as exiles. (As we learned last week, God doesn't deal only with individuals. God deals with nations).

But they didn't listen. They actually thought Jeremiah was crazy so no one believed him. But he wasn't, and in 597 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar invaded, destroyed Jerusalem and carried off thousands of ordinary citizens to Babylon which at the

time was not only the world's greatest and most populous city. It was also about as anti-god (at least as the Jews knew him) and as pagan as a culture could be.

In fact, in the center of the city was a 25-story tower at the top of which resided a huge statue of the idol Marduk.ⁱⁱⁱ And everywhere these displaced Jews went, they had to see this image which they knew to be nothing more than just a hunk of wood and metal. It was a miserable and demoralizing experience.

In fact, the entire book of Lamentations in the Old Testament is the record of their lament about their experience.

And the questions uppermost in the mind of this community within a community

were: “how long is this humiliating exile to continue?” and “what are we to do, trapped as we are in this heathen city characterized by customs and practices that are both repulsive to us and just as surely repulsive to YHWH?”

“Certainly the prophet will say to us that we must not give in to them, that we must keep ourselves free from their pagan taint, that we must worship YHWH alone and avoid these disgusting Babylonians in all things!”

So Jeremiah (who had been left behind in Jerusalem because he was too old to make the journey), in answer to their questions, sends them a letter which is recorded in the 29th chapter of the biblical book bearing his name.

And this is what it says:

Thus says the LORD of hosts [the God of angel armies], the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon:

“Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease.

In other words, you're not coming back to the homeland any time soon. And they didn't they were there for 70 years until Persia overthrew Babylon and let their descendants return home.

*“But seek the welfare of the city
where I have sent you into exile,
and pray to the LORD on its
behalf, for in its welfare you will
find your welfare.”*

Jeremiah 29:4-7 (ESV)

What a shock this response must have been!

Pray to YHWH for the shalom, the peace and welfare and soundness, of Babylon, the pagan center of all things we know as evil? What can Jeremiah mean by such an astonishing request? How is that even possible?

- It's possible because YHWH is, in fact, *God of that city* – not the so-called mighty Marduk sitting unmoved and unmoving at the top of a building.

- It's possible because YHWH has deep concern for Babylon and its people who do not know Him.

So, rather than hold their noses in horror at the pagans who would taint them, YHWH says that His people must pray for them, because they *all* are in the world of YHWH together.

And, furthermore, God says that His people must work for the welfare of that city. They are to “make the best of Babylon” and not just in terms of making it through a situation they'd rather not be in but in terms of making that city be a better city. That's their purpose, God says, as a community-within-a-community. They are to add value to that city.

Conclusion

And, friends, as Christians, we are a lot like them. We're aliens and strangers in an increasingly godless and pagan culture. In many ways, you and I today are living in Babylon.

And it's tempting to say "well, I'll just try to live as pure of a life as I can and let the world worry about itself. Maybe Jesus will come back soon and He'll renew and restore and regenerate everything."

But, friend, in the sight of we are *the ecclesia* in this community. And our calling is to seek the welfare of our city specifically through our goodness – our "energized faith" expressing itself in acts of love and

service for the benefit of all these people around us. Our task is to make our community a better one.

And that's what we'll be talking about in the next two Sundays. I'm going to tell you right now, you do not want to miss what's going to happen in the next two weeks as we talk about how that plays out individually and collectively.

But for now, what I want us to do is to affirm the reality that God is the God even of Babylon, even of this community though few recognize it. And I want us to affirm our calling to be light in this community through our goodness that adds wisdom and value.

So, would you stand with me and we're

going to pray. But we're going to sing our prayer. So, here we go.

Worship Song – God of This City

Thanks, would you be seated for just a moment?

Congregational Survey – Rick

1. Congregational Survey (bring golf clubs)
 - a. Our goal as a church is to collectively influence our community with generosity, with graciousness and with goodness. We want to produce men and women God-centered and Gospel-driven. And in order to do that, from time to time we need

feedback on how we're doing, so we take a survey.

2. Prayer Pastor

Endnotes

ⁱ *Questions about the Holy Spirit: The 60 Most Frequently Asked Questions*, by S. Michael Houdmann, General Editor quoted at <http://www.gotquestions.org/fruit-Holy-Spirit-goodness.html>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.vergenetwork.org/2011/01/01/alan-hirsch-what-is-a-missional-community-printable/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.patheos.com/Progressive-Christian/Pray-Shalom-John-Holbert-10-07-2013>