

Colossians 3:12–14 — So, you want to be a good person?

(Ryan van der Avoort — morning services, Sunday 29 December 2019)

Introduction

I think most people want to be good people – a ‘good person.’

- When we’ve already had a bad morning, and someone steps on our toe, we want to say ‘*ah it’s ok... go well!*’.
- When the kids (and by extension the parents) haven’t slept well for 6 consecutive weeks, and the baby starts crying again at 3am – we want to go in with gentleness, not seething with frustration.
- When someone’s in need, we want to care enough to help.
- When, anything really... I think we want to be good people.

Now of course perhaps some would say:

I don’t, who gives a damn.

But you’d only say that if you think you’re too far gone to return:

‘I could never be good’

OR if you’re too jaded by constant failure:

‘I seem to be doing good and then I mess up.

1 step forward, 3 steps back – again and again.’

But even there you want to be good – that’s why it’s so upsetting when you can’t - why the failure grinds at your soul.

And even the person who feels they’re too far gone – if offered the chance of a redo, I reckon they’d take it.

So, perhaps barring sociopaths and a few other abnormalities, generally speaking we want to be good people.

Here’s the problem though:

Secure goodness has to be given, it can’t be built

I’ve been using ‘good person’ as an example of identity we might strive for.

So, this actually is ‘secure *identity* has to be given, it can’t be built’.

It’s identity that’s at the heart here.

But most of our identities (formings of ourselves) are a variation of good...

Good person, good parent, good lover, good worker.

So, stick with ‘*good person*’ for now and consider what we have...

We want to be good.

And perhaps opportunities come along to be good, and let's say we take them.

Great!

But actually also: not so great.

Because *why* did I do that good?

I did it because *I want to be* good.

In other words, I did it *for me*.

I didn't unselfishly do it for the sake of goodness, or for others - I did it because *I want to be* good.

Or because I wanted someone to *think of me* as good.

See the issue here?

Even when doing good involves denying myself, I'm actually seeking to fulfil myself.

Building my identity one deed at a time.

Now look, you may be going:

'Ryan, awfully pessimistic view of humanity'

But, I'm not after pessimism, I'm after realism.

You must admit that the good we do is at best a mixed bag - sometimes genuinely for others, but often for ourselves.

It's that at best.

At worst it's for ourselves.

In other words, the issue is selfishness.

Our goodness is frequently selfish.

I think there's also a second reason why us doing good (building our goodness) can't be enough to make us a good person.

Not only is our goodness frequently selfish.

But ***our goodness is also frequently fragile.***

So, for instance: you pride yourself in being a *good* person.

But then your best friend tells you you're a selfish idiot.

Or you pride yourself in being a *good* student or worker but the performance report comes back with lower grades than your identity can handle.

See things start getting shaky when our identity (good person, good student/worker, good friend, good mom) is based on how well we're able to do **this**.

Because any 'attacks' to that self-image run the risk of shattering the good, whatever identity we're building.

In many ways this 'goodness' identity we scramble to build a good deed at a time is a little like a hologram image –

We project something out.

And it might look real.

But as soon as someone takes a bat to it, it goes hazy – it ain't real.

And so this is the problem with building our goodness, be it in a moral sense or in activities or performances.

- a) The motivation, it's frequently selfish.
- b) The security, it's frequently fragile.

Into this problem God makes an offer.

He offers an identity (a goodness) that is from the top-down, not the bottom-up.

See, we often work from the bottom-up:

We build our identity, build our goodness, build like the tower of Babel – up up up up.

But we've already seen: frequently selfish, frequently fragile.

Bottom-up isn't enough.

But God offers top-down.

He offers to *bestow* an identity – a worthiness and goodness.

Given not built.

Now consider what *that* does.

- Said firstly, building our goodness, frequently selfish.

And that's because we have to do good in order to keep or expand that goodness.

But if the goodness and identity is given, then I don't have to do to *build*, I can do simply to *be*.

There's immense freedom there in *being* not *building*.

- Secondly said building our goodness, frequently fragile

But again here, if given, and if secured by God himself, then attacks to that have God as our defense.

He's the one who's given us this goodness, let him defend it.

Immense security and *assurance*.

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From our passage today we're told that those trusting in Jesus, their goodness (again really our identity) is *given* in three ways - look at Colossians 3 verse 12.

It's given as those... *chosen, holy* and *loved*.

Let's touch on this rich givenness briefly.

Firstly,

i) Chosen

We often experience the desire, the need to be chosen.

You're a kid and two captains are choosing people for their team at school.

And you desperately want to be picked...

'we'll take...' – please be me!

Picking, being chosen, communicates value.

To be picked last says '*you have little to no value*'.

Horrible! - got it at school, but got it in so many other ways.

We want to be chosen for a job – again shows value and worth and someone thinking you have *it*.

We want this don't we?

A team, job... romance.

Social event – the invitation says someone chose us, wants us.

Now think what God is saying:

He's saying: '*I picked you – you are chosen.*'

(P)

Now maybe we start to go: '*well of course he picked me.*'

We think God looked at the crowd, and singled us out because there was an inner spark.

Perhaps our goodness, or our gifting – you know something God could use – we'll be valuable for his team.

But no! - that's not how *His* choosing works.

Not chosen because more valuable.

Chosen simply because God chose.

We struggle with this.

I want God to choose me because he saw something *in me*, some inherent goodness.

Something perhaps I can bring to the party – we prize giftedness.

But no. We think: '*oh horrible!*'

But again, it's actually incredibly freeing.

At every point this identity and relationship is based on God's choice *of me* not of something inherent *in me*.

Cause think, if something *of me* then what if I lose it?

Got the brains or the wit or the charm but then get Alzheimer's.

Got the beauty but it fades and droops with age.

You go from chosen *because* of something, to *discarded* because you lost that something.

How God chooses: we don't like this on many levels.

It's pushing against the way our culture and building of value operates...

But this is incredibly freeing if we'd accept it.

We need to hear this.

If I'm trusting in Jesus, then I'm chosen because He chose.

And my security before God is based at every point *on him, not me*.

Incredibly freeing, incredibly secure!

And here's part of the good news: this 'chosenness' can now filter into other areas of our lives where we might not get picked...

Where we might feel discarded on the pile - be it romantically, or socially, or job wise.

Incredibly difficult situations yes!

But it doesn't have to cripple us if we're chosen from the top-down.

Instead it can soften some of the pain of things here at this level (the horizontal), and comfort us while we bring our pain before God.

Secondly,

ii) Holy

Holy – set apart, distinct.

Mentorship is big these days.

Someone saying: *I'll invest in you, I'll develop you.*

Well God says:

'I declare you holy, set apart.'

And implicit in that is the promise to invest in us, shape us, mould us.

But again, not earned, but given.

We're declared holy not because of something in us but because he said *'you are holy'*.

Again liberty here, in particular in our stuff ups.

A holy huddle always carries the danger of being kicked out if your holiness doesn't meet the standards.

But here our holiness isn't built but given.

And listen here... that actually now gives us the *freedom* to *pursue* holiness!

I don't have to pursue holiness because otherwise I'll be kicked out.

No, I can pursue it because I've already been *given* it.

Let me try illustrate that.

Many moons ago I played semi-regular tennis with a friend of mine (JP).

And I'd find that when just playing socially, all good – really enjoyed it.

But when we said: '*right let's play for points*'- then things go wrong.

Cause now I'm so concerned to get the shots right that it tenses my shoulders, pulls them up.

And the result...I'd over pull on shots and they'd go out the side line.

Or I'd over compensate with power and they'd go over the back line.

Would particularly feel this in pressure moments – opponent (JP!) up and I need to come back, or worse *I'm up* and need to just hold my cool.

But when not for points, just my friend and I going back and forth over the net, well what happened?

Shoulders loose, shots flowing.

Why?

Because the result didn't matter and I could just pursue good tennis.

Similar here:

You *are* holy.

Right great, let's do it, I'm freed up to pursue being one of God's distinct people.

And I'm freed because the givenness of this holiness means *God* is more committed to it than me – he's the one who signed his name next to things.

Oh wonderful, even in my struggle with sin.

My sin now becomes something I *can* fight knowing that at the end of the day God's more interested in fighting it, even than me.

Thirdly,

iii) Loved

See if you know this song...

Love me love me

Say that you love me

Fool me fool me

Go on and fool me

Love me love me

Pretend that you love me

Leave me leave me

Just say that you need me

So I cry, and I beg for you to...

Old song by the Cardigans – not my song of choice!

But! - what they're describing is our desire is to be loved, even if at the end of the day it's just pretend.

Oh we hope it'll be real!

But we'll take pretend if that's all we can get.

To have that person say '*I love you; ngiyakuthanda; je t'aime*' ...that would be enough.

And yet, love is simultaneously the highest we seek, and the most commonly cheapened word in use.

Because we love... cats, and cars and chocolate (and a person)

Bleh!

But we want a love deeper and higher than a love for cats and cars and chocolate.

We want one that wraps around us securely like a blanket in winter.

And this is God's offer!

You are loved - personally, relationally, not as a thing.

See in all this, it's although God is reminding us:

You're not my charity project.

You're not a thing.

You're not something I like every now and then.

You're not even something that makes me feel better.

No, you're a person, and I'm invested in you as a person.

And my love, no pretend.

I'll prove I love you by sacrificing the best I have.

- From the Father it's him saying, '*I'll give you my Son, the apple of my eye*'.
- From the Son it's him saying, '*I'll give you my life*'.
- From the Spirit it's him saying, '*I'll pour this love into your heart*'.

Easy to rattle off '*I love you*' even to people.

But God nails it to a bloody roman cross with great sacrifice and pain to show us – to prove it.

I love you, personally, relationally, deeply – dearly, at great cost to me.

Friends, here's the offer which Jesus' followers have accepted:

To be God's *chosen* people, *holy* and *dearly loved*.

A secure identity, which can't be taken or stolen or changed, because it's given by God himself.

Immense freedom and security on offer with the givenness.

Now here's what comes next then...

God's people are to then wear their given identity.

See again, remember me and pulling my shots in tennis with JP?

But when relaxed - better posture and movement.

Similar here:

Goodness, identity given, secured – how we perform doesn't matter.

But we're being invited now to so have this givenness rule in our hearts that it...

overflows into how we live *especially* in our daily relationships – cause that's the main realm of godliness in the Christian life.¹

And so verse 12, have a look:

Clothe yourself with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.

Verse 13 bear with one another and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.

Verse 14: And over all these² put on love which binds them together in perfect unity.

Now all those things... compassion, kindness etc...

Why do we need these things?

It's because we live among people!

And living with people invites conflict, issues – I don't have to prove this – you know it.

People with you, you with people – all these issues, often daily.

But look what's happening here.

If the beginning of verse 12 is true:

Chosen, holy, loved by God...

Then it changes how I relate to people –

Because I am secure before God, I don't have to view the people around me as enemies – as potential threats to me building my identity or satisfaction.

Let me show you.

- Verse 12: compassion – it's talking about a 'tender-heartedness' towards others.

See we can view people as those who *might* steal from me and my little kingdom – but going through life like that puts up walls.

But this is walls down and actually a heart that tenderly extends towards others.

And I can do that because I'm not so consumed with building my own identity that the people around me become potential enemies (or means) to me succeeding.

Now with a given identity, I'm free to see people differently.

It'll look like firstly, tender-heartedness/compassion.

¹ And this is really the call from this part: For the Christian, be who you have already been made to be. ID given therefore... You're on the team already, so go on... On the team, so wear the team colours (clothe yourself) with...

² [virtues]

- And kindness – a generosity towards others.
- And humility – I don't have to set myself up.

I can see others as above me, in fact I'm invited to do so, and for that to be ok.

- Gentleness – there is meekness to my strength.

Instead of my strength crushing others it is tempered like soft hands with a little baby – I can reach out to others in gentle words and deeds and attitude.

- And patience.

Again we lack patience when people are viewed as a threat to me getting what I need.

Usually in my time and time frame:

The slow driver in the fast lane, or the child who just won't get her shoes on quick enough (so many real life examples for me – what would they be for you?)

But I can try with God's help to replace that *impatience* with *patience* because my identity is not built but given.³

And this patience will bleed into, look at verse 13, '*bearing with one another*'.

It's almost literally something like '*endure others*'.

Hectic!

You get it though?

Longsuffering – is the old English word.

A touch negative but almost gritting your teeth as someone wrongs you, or biting your tongue.

But it's not all as negative as that especially because of the next part:

Not only bear with, but also forgive.

Think about it this a touch more...

Each wrong committed against me doesn't need to result in that person going onto the 'punished' or 'ignored' or 'I'll get you back' list.

Chuck that offense behind you in some ways, rather than using it as the sheet through which you view someone.

Endure *and* forgive.

On this quickly:

How are your relationships going with their knocks and bruises and grievances?

Are you holding on to those things from other people?

³ Maybe I can arrive late, despite my best intentions, because well I'm chosen, holy and loved.

Do you make sure it's the way you view a person – you only see them through the rap-sheet of their offenses against you?

Oh my, thank God he doesn't view us through our rap-sheets, right?

And this really is the motivation – last part of verse 13...

See in being encouraged to forgive we're tempted to go:

'Well how many times?

And in what circumstances?'

These are the questions my hard heart asks.

But end of verse 13: *'forgive as the Lord forgave you.'*

Oh! Well that changes things...

Especially if we're rightly aware of how much we've been forgiven and not just once off but daily.

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[May not do the following section... time-dependant]

[Now listen, forgiveness and reconciliation is an intense struggle when the wrongs against us have been particularly extreme or systematic.

Forgiveness is not the same as forgetting the need for justice.

Forgiveness may still, in some situations involve pursuing justice in this life now.

But at the end of the day it will rest in the God of ultimate justice.

And so perhaps once you've done what you can for justice now, you hand their rap sheet over to God.

And with his help you stop using that as the dominant lens through which you view someone or a group of people.]

(P)

But let's be honest!

Most of our grievances aren't in this category.

Most of them are petty things we make larger than life because someone has trod on the king of our lives (namely us) and so we cry *'I'll get you!'*

Friends, holding on to wrongs is both toxic for us, and also treats others the very opposite to how God treats us.

Forgive as the Lord forgave you.

You can only do that if you know the Lord's forgiveness.

And the opposite is true.

Listen carefully here...

Sometimes our lack of forgiveness can reveal that we don't properly know or experience the Lord's forgiveness of our grievances against both him and others.

Is that you?

What might your forbearance and forgiveness of others be showing about *your* need and trust for forgiveness before God?

Lastly, and how verse 14 ends makes perfect sense:

Over all these put on love which binds them all together in perfect unity.

Put on love because love is the stuff of life – we were made to love God and love others.

It's active - reach out.

It's generous, sacrificial, embracing – not at arms-length.

The kind of love that at the end of the day we know if we're trusting in Jesus

Because we ourselves are loved, we can now love.

Our given identity flows out into daily life and in particular our daily relationships, the jurisdiction of true godliness.

Conclusion: God's people live under an achieved reality.

Let me end with one very practical way for this to soak into our living.

At multiple times in the last year or so I've written three words on my wrist:

Chosen, holy, loved – even considered getting it tattooed.

But it was simply my attempt to remind myself of my given identity and then with God's help to have it overflow into my life.

And so, here we go:

I lose my patience with my energy bursting daughter who refuses to listen to reason.

What next?

Well, my failure could have kept crushing me – I mean who loses their cool with a 4 year old little girl.

And all because, yes, she was being rebellious (and we'll work on that).

But more so because I needed my structure and order and this little girl was messing up my mojo.

Well again, what next?

Chosen, holy, loved.

'Father, sorry.

And thanks, that I still have this identity even though I know what I just did.

And thanks, I feel my unholiness but I know you've made me holy and are committed to seeing that flow out increasingly into how I love the people around me.'

Tell you what, next time... my daughter is screaming at me again.

And this time, the 'chosen holy loved' comes to me *before* and not *after*.

'Chosen, holy loved.

Father help me to be kind and gentle and patient with my little girl.'

And into the fray I go.

You gotta realise this friends.

Besides delighting in and enjoying the God we've been brought back into relationship with...

Besides that, the other massive part of the Christian life is about us realising and living out who God *has already made us in Jesus*, and to have that flow out especially into life with the people around us.

See what the Spirit is doing...

Through the bumps and hurdles of everyday life, most often involving the messiness of relationships...

He is working to change and shape us more and more into who he's already declared us in Jesus.

And from our side, one of the best ways we can keep in step with the Spirit's work is to have who the Father has made us in Jesus front and centre:

Chosen, holy, loved.

And with his help to have it saturate our living.⁴

⁴ For those of you with the printed copy of this sermon...

We want the Word we heard on Sunday to not just go in one ear and out the other, but instead for it to dwell in us richly (Col 3:16). You may like to take this out again on Monday morning and read through what's below.

Recap

Colossians 3:12-14: So, you want to be a good person?

1. Secure goodness has to be given, it can't be built.

Remember: our goodness is frequently selfish, our goodness is frequently fragile.

God instead offers a 'givenness' from the top-down: Chosen, holy, loved.

2. God's people are to then wear their given identity

Chosen, holy, loved by God, changes how I then relate to people in my everyday relationships.

3. Conclusion: God's people lived under an achieved reality.

Idea: write those three on your wrist.

For us to live out this week

- Spend some time reflecting on each of the 3 'givens' of: chosen, holy and loved. You could try and do 1 a day.

- Go through the list of things we are wear as God's people – are there any particular weak spots for you at the moment? Be specific in confessing areas of your life where you are not 'wearing' your given Christian identity. Confess this to God. Why not also confess it to another person and ask for prayer from them in remembering who you are in Christ.

- How are your daily relationships going, especially related to grievances and issues? Are there people you need to have a conversation with – perhaps either confessing your sin, or seeking reconciliation?

- In what other way can you practically remind yourself that you are 'Chosen, holy and loved' this week so that you can, with the Spirit's help, live as one of his people with other people? Try and rope in someone else to do this with if possible.

For further reflection

READ - read Colossians 3 in its entirety to see those verses in their stunning context.