

**There's an App for That:  
Reflections on the Most Important Christian Qualities**  
*Generosity*

Deuteronomy 15:7-11; Mark 7:1-13

August 8, 2010

By Dr. David B. Freeman, Pastor  
Weatherly Heights Baptist Church

I was part of a homemade intervention once. It was with a man in my church in Birmingham who was addicted to crack cocaine. Nobody but he and his wife knew. He didn't use it daily or even weekly. He could stay clean for weeks at a time and then binge. He would go to a seedy section of town, risk his reputation and life, purchase thousands of dollars of crack, and then check into a motel. He would spend the next week in a crack induced high, eating little and sleeping even less.

His wife asked for my help. So I organized a small group of men who confronted him. He wanted our help, so we agreed to be his support group. We agreed to call him every day, no matter where we were. Some of the men were businessmen who traveled across the country. No matter where we were, though, we called him, and we agreed to ask him these questions every day: "Have you done crack today? And do you feel vulnerable to using crack today?"

I would like to tell you our little homemade intervention was successful, but it wasn't. He stopped using crack but, as is often the case without professional intervention, replaced it with something else.

This may sound odd to you at first, but I am now convinced that was an example of generosity, the sixth fruit of the Spirit. We've spent the summer studying these nine important qualities. So far we have looked at love, joy, peace, patience, and kindness. The sixth fruit of the Spirit, in my translation, is generosity. Your translation may read differently, though. Most English translations use the word "goodness" to translate the Greek word *agathosune*. It's an interesting word, and it took me a while to understand why the NRSV chooses the word generosity rather than goodness. This fruit of the Spirit is different from the ones we've studied so far. It has an edge to it. It is good but not necessarily nice. The app may

surprise you, Mark 7, where Jesus confronts the Pharisees for their hypocrisy.

Here's what happened. The Pharisees complained that the disciples of Jesus did not wash their hands before they ate. The Pharisees not only washed their hands; they purified themselves and washed all their dishes. They tended to the minutia of their religious laws, yet they neglected their own parents. The Ten Commandments clearly taught that they were to honor father and mother. That was not in question. Everyone accepted that as true. Yet these Pharisees took the money they could have used to care for their parents and put it in escrow. It was dedicated to God, they said, what they called Corban. Since it was dedicated to God, they couldn't use it to care for their parents.

Jesus called them hypocrites. They complained about unwashed hands, yet they neglected their own parents and thereby violated one of the Ten Commandments. So Jesus exercised *agathosune*. He confronted them.

The word is used only four times in the New Testament and is not used outside the Bible. It appears to be a generic word for goodness, the broadest Greek word for goodness. The British New Testament theologian William Barclay gives some important insight. He says that it is the kind of goodness that might correct or rebuke someone. He says Jesus' action when he cleansed the temple was *agathosune*. (*The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians*, The Daily Study Bible, p. 56) It is goodness that is strong, goodness that is willing to do difficult work on behalf of another. Sometimes we call it tough love today. It's love, it's goodness, but it will not be pushed around. It will not stand by idly when someone you love is hurting himself. It makes hard decisions and takes hard actions on behalf of another person.

So why does the NRSV use the word generosity rather than goodness? It is a generous giving of oneself to do this kind of goodness. It is generosity of one's emotional and spiritual energy, possibly one's financial resources, to engage someone at this level. It's not just goodness; it is generous goodness.

It is the kind of generosity we see at this Table. The sacrifice that stands at the center of our faith is goodness, yes. But more accurately, it is

generosity, goodness that was willing to do difficult work on our behalf. Jesus did not stand by idly.

Love first. Then joy, peace, patience, and kindness. Then the sixth fruit of the Spirit is generosity. It calls you and me to a goodness that is strong and willing to do difficult work on behalf of others. Today it is modeled before us in the body that was broken and the blood that was poured out for us. As we take the bread and cup, let us cultivate generosity in our lives and in our church.