

“TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING?”

Scripture lesson: 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

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When I was 6 or 7 years old, Mr. Jones, who lived down the street from us, had apple trees in his side yard. We found those trees, one day, while we were roaming the neighborhood playing hide-and-go-seek. It must have been in the early summer, because the trees were loaded with small apples but they were all green.

Not thinking he would mind, we picked some of the apples and sat down under a tree to eat them. I discovered I liked that tart, tingly taste of green apples. After finishing one, I had another and another and another, until I had eaten, probably, a dozen. Finally satisfied, we resumed our game of hide-and-go-seek.

But it wasn't long before I was seeking something else – the nearest bathroom. Those apples gave me the biggest stomach I had ever had. I thought I was going to die. When I got home my mama gave me whatever mamas give you for that kind of thing, and then she gave me a little advice. “You can get too much of a good thing.”

I have always remembered that advice – even if I haven't always followed it. “You can get too much of a good thing.” That's true in a lot of areas of life. Something which is good, in and of itself, can in excess, become something not so good...even bad. But that is a hard lesson to learn.

For example, our culture places a lot of emphasis on looking good. Cosmetics is a \$9 billion a year industry in the US – all that money spent to make us look better.

There was a report out this week on the increasing use of plastic surgery. In the last decades, the number of procedures done has increased by 500%. The biggest increase recently has been among those who are over 65 – a 21% increase in procedures in just one year. Botox and collagen injections, lipo suction, face lifts, laser skin treatments, the list goes on and on. There is almost no price we won't pay to look good. And why not? There is no virtue in letting ourselves go to pot, and nothing wrong with wanting to look good. Unless it becomes too much of a good thing.

Part of the image of looking good has to do with being thin. The pages of fashion magazines are filled with slender models wearing clothes that the majority of women could not wear without starving themselves to death. Sixty-five percent of women ages 25-45 are trying to lose weight, although 53% of them are already at a healthy weight. Ten million women in America suffer from serious eating disorders; with many of these in the 15-19-year-old age group. For these young girls, thinness can become an obsession – it takes over their lives and can eventually take their lives. Trying to look good can become too much of a good thing.

The same can be said about our obsession with feeling good. In the 60's and 70's, a lot of the old, seemingly, repressive conventions of our society were swept aside. The hypocrisy of many of our institutions was exposed – too many people telling us what we should and shouldn't do. People were repressed as a result, we thought, filled with too much guilt and remorse over too many things. And so the antidote, the motto, became “if it feels good do it.” If you want to do something, and it doesn't hurt anyone else, then do it. By extension, you shouldn't do anything if you don't feel

like it. Feelings became the bottom line, the standard by which everything was to be judged. If it feels good do it, if it doesn't don't.

Now, of course, there is nothing wrong with feeling good. In fact, there is everything right about it. We need to feel good about ourselves in order to be productive. Most emotional and mental illness has to do with feelings of guilt and shame. But when it comes to feelings, it is possible to have too much of a good thing.

You can place a rat in a cage with two feeding stations. The lever at one station releases food, the lever at the other a shot of cocaine. Given the choice, a rat will continue to press "the feel good" cocaine lever again and again, until it dies.

There is nothing wrong with feeling good, but sometimes we will choose what feels good over what is good for us! Won't we? You can get too much of a good thing and the results can be costly.

This is the problem which Paul faced with the church at Thessalonica. In very strong language, Paul writes to condemn those who are living in idleness. "We command you," he writes, in almost military language. "We command you to keep away from believers who are living in idleness and not according to the tradition that they received from us."

As a backdrop to this passage, we need to remember that many in the early church expected the return of Jesus within their lifetimes. Rumors of his imminent return were causing some people to panic and other to picnic. Convinced that Jesus was returning soon, some believers simply quit their jobs and were sitting around waiting for his arrival. They had their bags packed and their tickets punched and were just waiting for the train to roll into the station and take them to heaven on a one-way ticket. They refused to do any work at all. Since they thought they had already obtained the gift of salvation, they were just waiting for God to finish the job.

About 70 years ago, the New York Giants played the Chicago Cubs in the Pennant race. The game was scoreless until the last half of the 9th inning. The Giant were at bat. They had a runner on first and third. The batter had two strikes against him, and a player named Merkel was the runner on first. Merkel figured if the batter got a hit, the runner on third would advance to home plate, and he would go to second, and the Giants would win the Pennant Series.

Sure enough the batter got a hit that sailed into the outfield. The runner on third sprinted toward home and Merkel broke for second. When the crowd let out a roar, Merkel knew that the runner on third had scored, the game was over. So before he got to second, he ran off the field into the locker room.

One of the Cubs noticed that Merkel had not tagged second. He pointed it out to the umpire and the umpire ruled that the game had ended in a tie. The game had to be played again, and the next time, the Cubs won the Pennant race and went on to the World Series. If it had not been for Merkel assuming the game was over and failing to tag second, the Giants would have played in that series.

That's the problem Paul was facing. There were believers in Thessalonica who had assumed that the game was already over. They had already won, so they headed to the showers too soon. They left the field before the issue had been finally settled.

Paul was addressing Christians who were enjoying the gift of salvation that God has given them, but they were not doing anything with that gift. They were waiting it out; sitting on their hands. Or, as Fred Craddock puts it, they were "wallowing in grace." It's, kind of, the I'm okay, you're okay, feel good faith. Paul calls them idlers.

But there is more. Since they didn't have any meaningful work to do, these idlers had nothing else to do but to sit around and complain about what everyone else was doing. We all know those kinds of people. You can find them in the church sometimes! They love to tell other people what to do but don't lift a finger themselves. Have you ever noticed that the naysayers tend to be the ner-do-wells? I saw a sign once that said that "the person who says it can't be done shouldn't get in the way of the one doing it." Paul has a word for these folks too. He calls them "busybodies."

You recognize the problem. From all outward appearances we can look good, we can have the right theology, believe the right things, feel good about ourselves, and still miss the mark. So Paul has a word of advice for these idlers, these busybodies: "Do not grow weary in well doing."

God's offer of salvation is free. It is for everyone. The question is not, do we have it, but what are we doing *with* it. Something is expected from those who receive God's gift of grace. We are expected, not only to feel good, but to do good.

Brothers and sister, do not grow weary in well doing. Those words are for us too. In our feel good, look good culture, the one thing we may be forgetting is to do good.

Several years ago, someone coined the term *compassion fatigue*. We have seen so much over our TV screen – the pictures of starving children in Somalia, the earthquake victims in Japan, war casualties in the Middle East, storm victims in our own state – that these lose their ability to shock us. In the face of all the bad things we see, it is easy to grow hardened, even a bit cynical at times. The airwaves are filled with stories of the naysayers who are quick to point out the downside of recovery efforts – the holes in our buckets.

In the face of all the catastrophes in our world, we are tempted to retreat into a feel good Christianity which gives us all the consolations of faith but none of its demands. A faith that is quick to claim Jesus without living up to the claims of Jesus. We are tempted to substitute feeling good, looking good, for doing good.

In 1983, an 8.2 earthquake hit and almost flattened Soviet Armenia. More than 30,000 people were killed in less than 4 minutes. In the midst of all that devastation and chaos, a father left his wife securely at home to rush to the local school where his son was supposed to be. He found the building leveled; as flat as a pancake.

As he stood there, he remembered a promise he had made to his son, "No matter what, I will always be there for you." Tear filled his eyes, as he looked at all that debris piled up. It looked hopeless, but he began to dig through that rubble.

He remembered his son's classroom would be in the back right corner of the building, so that's where he started to dig. As he was digging, other parents arrived, clutching their hearts, saying "My son!" "My daughter!" Other well-meaning parents tried to pull the father off the rubble saying, "It's too late," and "They're all dead. You can't help. Go Home." "Face reality!" they said to him. "There is nothing you can do. You are just going to make matters worse." But to each person who said this to him he replied, "Are you going to help me now?" And he continued to remove the rubble stone by stone.

The fire chief showed up and tried to pull him off the debris, telling him that fires were breaking out; there were gas explosions all over town. Go home to your wife. But this father kept saying, "Are you going to help me now?"

The police came and said, "You are angry and distraught, it's all over now. You are endangering others. Go Home." And the father replied, "Are you going to help me now." No one did. No one helped.

But this man continued alone. He dug for 8 hours...12 hours...24 hours...36 hours...and then in the 38th hour, he pulled back a boulder and heard his son's voice. He screamed out his son's name, "Armand!" He heard back, "Dad! It's me, Dad! I told the other kids not to worry. I told them that if you were alive you would save me, and when you saved me they would be saved too. You promised you would always be with me. You did it dad!

"What's going on in there...how is it?" his father asked.

"There are 14 of us alive out of 33," the boy said. "We are scarred and thirsty and hungry. When the building fell it made a wedge, and saved us."

"Come on out son," the father said.

"No dad," this son said, "let the others come first, because I know you will get me no matter what. I know you will be there."

God has promised that he will always be there for us. In Christ, God has entered the ruin of this world to save and to rescue. As he goes about this dangerous and difficult work, there are many who say it is hopeless, so why try. Others just sit on the sidelines and complain, or give up and go home. But Christ is saying to us – who claim to be his disciples – are you going to help me now? The rescue is not over, will you help?

Long ago, John Wesley told the people called Methodist to "do all the good you can, as often as you can, to as many people as you can." Too much of a good thing? No. The world can't get too much goodness. "Do not grow weary in well doing," Paul says.