

# The Park Road Pulpit

*Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church*

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***The Reality of Go(o)dness***

*Psalm 100; James 1.12-18*

Russ Dean, September 3, 2006



Very few rote prayers were prayed in the home of my childhood. But what American home has not graced at least a few meals with the words:

“God is great. God is good. Let us thank him for our food.  
By his hands we all are fed. Give us, Lord, our daily bread.”?

I’m glad that my parents encouraged their children to learn to pray in our own words, out loud. I hope you encourage the same of your children, but somewhere along the way I also learned to think disparagingly of memorized prayers, as if someone else’s words couldn’t be as meaningful, or that the pray-er of such prayers was a spiritual neophyte, unable to approach God with her own thoughts. But as I began thinking this week of the goodness of God, the prayer came to my mind, and I was impressed at the deeply theological character of these familiar words. As we consider James’ profound assertion, *every generous act... every perfect gift, is from above*, we may not be able to do any better than to consider the very act of “saying grace” as a way to evaluate his belief.

(As a related aside, I will hasten to add that your pastors, often, though not always, as my friend Bill Hull likes to say “dispense with the liturgical formalities” when eating in a public establishment. [In plain English, we do not always bow our heads and pray a prayer, aloud, before we eat!] I could elaborate, but in summary I’ll tell you that my theological justification comes from Jesus’ exhortation, “*When you pray... go to your*

*closet...*<sup>1</sup> I rarely eat a meal that I am not specifically cognizant of the blessing that is mine, of my life that is filled with such abundance that I never have to think about where my next meal is coming from, and of the countless children world-wide who are hungry even as I eat, but I don't always make my thanksgiving a matter of public display. I am thankful in the closet of my own mind and heart, and trust that my quiet thanksgiving is acceptable to God. As I understand it, this is why we pray – not to give subtle [or, as is sometimes the case, not so subtle] witness to our own piety among the “heathen” dining around us!)

But, back to my point, I do believe that the discipline of asking a blessing, of saying “grace” before a meal, of pausing, literally, to recognize that in some way God is responsible for this every day blessing and is, therefore, in some way to be thanked, is an act with profound meaning, and whose theological significance cannot be quickly dismissed. We know of course, even our children understand, that God has in no literal way given us our food, nor has God literally prepared it for us. So why not just give thanks to Mom who bought the food and Dad who fixed the meal, or vice versa? Or to the farmers who raised the chickens and the good folks at Chic Fila who set it before us?

Why give thanks to God for our food? “By his hands...” Are we all fed?”

When I was an Associate Pastor in Birmingham, I was active in a summer mission project in which my church participated, annually, with about forty other churches. Our church would travel to the construction site during the third week of the

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<sup>1</sup> *And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret... Matthew 6.5-6. Are restaurant prayers more about being seen praying, than praying?*

build, and meet several other churches there. We worked on roofing, duct work, and a few other mechanical elements because among these several churches there were specialists in each of these areas. During the week we would work, in the words of Bob Clare, from “can to can’t,” sweating and toiling and enjoying the luxury of working for pleasure, alongside good friends.

During one of those summers, a charismatic leader in one of the churches introduced the group to a cheer of sorts that was a tradition in his congregation. Standing in front of the group, or pausing to catch his breath in the hot attic, or garnering the attention of roofers high above – in other words, whenever the Spirit moved him – he would shout: “God is good.” And the reply would come, “All the time!” “All the time,” he would return, and they would shout, “God is good!”

God is good. All the time!  
All the time. God is good!

Cheerleading, especially “Holy cheers,” has never really been my thing, but this simple and passionate refrain has stayed with me.

Echoing the sentiments of some of the writers of our Hebrew scriptures, my late friend, Gene Owens, would question the truth of this little enthusiasm. (And he would no doubt hate the cheer itself!) Gene insisted that there is a “dark side to God.” God is not only the giver of *every good and perfect gift*, but God’s “goodness” is equaled by God’s “Godness,” which, according to numerous Old Testament examples, allows God to do good, and, well, whatever else God chooses.

You may recall the words of the suffering Job, replying to his nagging wife, who encouraged him to curse God and die:

*You speak as any foolish woman would speak. Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad? (2.10) [for...] Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed by the name of the LORD. (Job 1.21)*

Isaiah puts it even more starkly when he speaks as the mouthpiece of God:

*I am the LORD, and there is no other... I form light and create darkness; I make weal and create woe (the Hebrew word here is "ra, which can also be translated "evil")... I the LORD do all these things. (Isaiah 45.5-7)*

If the Hebrews had cheered, I believe their chant would not have been, "God is good... all the time," but simply "God is God... all the time. All the time... God is God."

Do what you will with Gene and with his ancient ancestors' affirmation that God gives and takes away, and that the Deity engages evil among us, but we will find common ground among people of faith in insisting on God's goodness.<sup>2</sup> From the very beginning, scripture speaks of a God of great abundance, a beneficent creator who pronounces all of the work of God's own genius, "good," who gives the divine image to the human being (who was in some ways a disappointment from the very beginning!), who bestows life in all its forms, who walks among God's own in the shade of the garden, who heals, who cleanses, who gives and forgives.

In an amazing article called "The liturgy of abundance, the myth of scarcity," Walter Brueggemann traces an evolving world-view among the Hebrew people. After a whirlwind tour of early scripture, Brueggemann says,

...these scriptures proclaim that God's force of life is loose in the world... [that] Blessing is the force of well-being active in the world, and faith is the awareness that creation is the gift that keeps on giving.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> I have no doubt that our ancestors would have affirmed both. That God was, in fact, good and engaged in evil, for such was the divine prerogative.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Brueggemann, recorded in "The Christian Century," March 24-31, 1999, p.342.

It is only with the story of exile, with the introduction of Pharaoh that the mood changes. “For the first time in the Bible,” according to Brueggemann, “someone says, ‘There’s not enough. Let’s get everything’... Pharaoh introduces the principle of scarcity into the world economy.”<sup>4</sup>

In his thumbnail history of our story with God, it is when we who trust in God’s basic goodness are introduced to the Pharaoh’s of the world, those who, out of fear and lack of faith, grasp for control and power and acquisition, that we are introduced to another view of reality. It is a view called scarcity. “People who think their lives consist of struggling to get more and more,” he says, “can never slow down because they won’t ever have enough.”<sup>5</sup>

The consistent affirmation of the faithful, however, is that that which is truly important to us comes not from hoarding or acquiring, not from striving or attaining, not from the security that we can gain through our own power (whether financial or military), but through the goodness of God, which can be known in the many graces of today. Our health. Our family. A symphony. A baby’s coo. A still small presence of peace amidst a troubled and warring world. Faith for today. Hope for tomorrow. Love for ever. Lunch! These are the abundant gifts of God.

God is good. All the time!  
All the time. God is good!

It is life lived in thrall to the myth of scarcity, that alternate view of reality, which leads to the kind of self-centeredness, the kind of disordered passions with which James begins our text today. *One is tempted by one’s own desire... [which, when] conceived, gives birth to sin... [which] when it is fully grown gives birth to death* (1.14-15). Death,

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<sup>4</sup> Brueggemann, p.342.

<sup>5</sup> Brueggemann, p.343.

in all its many forms, is the result of a kind of self-centered living. James contrasts this living with the life of generous giving, which is the heart of God. Jesus made this life clear to us in both his living and his dying. *[He who wants] to save [his] life will lose it, and [she who] will lose [her] life for my sake will find it* (Matthew 16.25).

Brueggemann says,

the central problem of our lives is that we are torn apart by the conflict between our attraction to the good news of God's abundance and the power of our belief in scarcity – a belief that makes us greedy, mean and unneighborly. We spend our lives trying to sort out that ambiguity.<sup>6</sup>

In different words, Luke Timothy Johnson's commentary on James gives the same message as Brueggemann's liturgy of abundance and myth of scarcity. Johnson also insists that there are two views of reality present in our world. One is the view defined by science, where only that which can be seen and measured (that is, our physical world), is real, and where God, who obviously cannot be measured, comes more and more in question. But, according to Johnson, "for James, the opposite is the case..."

If reality is defined by the endless bestowal of gifts, then it is not a closed system but an open one, not a world of limited resources, but of infinitely renewable resources. And if God defines reality, then humans are not in competition with each other... so that their desires must lead ultimately to murder; rather, humans can gift each other as God gifts them.<sup>7</sup>

This is the view of reality which frames my life and thinking and living and working. And, as important as the discipline of science is to me, I choose to believe that it is science which is the "alternate view of reality." I stand, even in a modern world, with the ancients, still affirming that God is that which is most real, the source of life, the

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<sup>6</sup> Brueggemann, p.343.

<sup>7</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol.XII," p.190. Johnson continues, "For those living under the influence of modernity, the intellectual atmosphere shaped by the Enlightenment, "the world" is what is more real and obvious. It is a closed system of cause and effect and of limited resources. Humans are defined by their place in this system, and the system is defined by the capacity of human reason to measure it. What seems least real or obvious is "God," a name that has increasingly been reduced to a concept, and one that people must struggle to take seriously."

mysterious force which brought and still brings order from chaos, the origin of all that is good.<sup>8</sup>

Why give thanks to God, then, for our food? Because I believe the world is, in ways that science will never affirm, and ways that the peddlers of fear and scarcity do not want you to believe, bent toward us by a benevolent God who, as Jesus said, “*makes the sun rise on the evil and the good; sends the rain on the righteous and the unrighteous*” (Matthew 5.45).<sup>9</sup> I believe that in recognizing the presence of God even in a simple meal, we can learn to recognize the Reality of Goodness all around us. The Reality of Godness all around us.

God is good. (congregation: All the time!)  
All the time. (congregation: God is good!)

I believe it is so. May it be so today, even in our *generous acts of giving*. Let us pray.

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<sup>8</sup> I am aware that my argument runs squarely in the face with evolutionary biologists who can explain all “good” in terms of a purely naturalistic evolution (i.e., a world that develops apart from any divine source). Even altruism can be explained, in naturalistic terms, as resulting from “the selfish gene,” seeking its own survival. Though I can affirm evolutionary theory, almost in its complete form (such as there is a “complete form” of the theory), I find this explanation (of the instinct to the good) sufficient though not necessary. As one who believes, first, in God, who sees God as that which is “most real,” a much more satisfactory understanding for me is that God is that source which draws us (even beyond our evolutionary development) to do good, for the sake of the good, alone. I cannot understand why, in purely evolutionary terms, anyone would ever be moved to “*give his life for his friends*” (John 15.13). Can this kind of sacrificial love, which is at the heart of God, really be justified in terms of any “selfish gene?”

<sup>9</sup> This claim is not the equivalent of saying that God is a kind of “Santa Claus” in the sky, standing by, waiting to “bless us,” as many preachers seem to claim. I find such thinking quite harmful. I can no longer conceive of God as an “interventionist God” who gives (to some), blesses (some), answers (some) prayers, etc... leaving us to figure out the “who” and the “how” and the “why” and, especially, the “why nots” of such a sporadic care. Instead, I affirm the presence and care and love of God in every moment, seeking, always to do all that God can do. *For we know that all things work together for good...* (Romans 8.28). My scant Greek knowledge (which may make me more dangerous than helpful!) tells me that the word for “work together” is “*sunergei*.” I understand in this that God is the “energy” at work in all things, bringing about good, even in the most surprising places. Also, Paul speaks of the “*one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all* (Ephesians 4.6). God is “through all” and “in all,” not just standing apart, choosing when and where to be active – “God always does everything God can do” (Frank Tupper).