GROWING IN GOODNESS
Romans 16:19
By Andy Manning

I. INTRODUCTION

1. **Brennan Manning** "The greatest single cause of atheism in the world today is Christians who acknowledge Jesus with their lips, walk out the door, and deny Him by their lifestyle. That is what an unbelieving world simply finds unbelievable."
2. If there is no difference between you and your unbelieving friends, then they will not be interested in your religion.
3. Question: How are you different from your unbelieving friends?
4. I know you're different in your beliefs, and in the fact that you attend church. But how are you different in your character and conduct?
5. This morning I want to teach you how to grow more like Christ in your character and conduct.
6. Take your Bible and turn to Romans 16:19.
7. The title of the sermon is "Growing in Goodness."

II. TEXT

1. **Romans 16:19** The report of your obedience has reached everyone. Therefore I rejoice over you, but I want you to be wise about what is good, and yet innocent about what is evil.

III. INITIAL COMMENTS

1. I want us to focus on these words: "I want you to be wise about what is good, and yet innocent about what is evil."
2. What does that mean?
3. Let's begin with the word "wise" (Gk., *sophia*). Wisdom is more than knowledge. It is the right application of knowledge. So, Paul is saying, "I want you to know and correctly apply goodness in your life."
4. NIV Study Bible: "Christians are to be experts in doing good."
5. What does the word "good" (Gk., *agathos*) mean?
    i. We use that word in all sorts of ways:
        1. He's a good baby.
        2. She's a good dog.
        3. That was a good movie.
        4. It's been a really good car.
        5. He's a good athlete.

6. She's a good leader.
7. That's a good restaurant.
8. That was a good sermon.

ii. In this context, the word "goodness" simply means good character and conduct. It is synonymous with righteous (Mt 5:43-45), or moral excellence. Goodness means Christlike character and conduct.

iii. Goodness is the opposite of evil (Mt 5:45; Rm 12:9, 21; 16:19; 2 Cor 5:10). Paul says he wants them to be "innocent about what is evil." The Greek word for "innocent" means unmixed, or pure. It was used of wine or milk unmixed with water. Goodness is righteous character unmixed with any sin.

6. Paul is saying that he wants the church in Rome to be expert practitioners of goodness.
7. This is what God wants for you. God wants you to grow in goodness. To become Christlike in your character, conduct, and convictions. To keep growing until you are perfectly innocent of evil.
8. This morning I want to give you some instruction about how to do that – how to grow in goodness. To grow in goodness you must avoid six mistakes. These are mistakes that will distract you and prevent you from becoming the person that God wants you to be.

IV. SIX MISTAKES TO AVOID

1. Avoid legalism.

i. What is legalism? Legalism is pursuing goodness to earn your way to heaven. It is relying upon good works to get you to heaven.

ii. **Ephesians 2:8-9 (NLT)** God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it.

iii. How do you get saved and receive eternal life? "Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done." You can't earn heaven by being good. Why not? There are two ways to get to heaven: The performance plan and the grace plan. The performance plan means that God treats you according to what you deserve; it's based on what you have earned; it depends on your performance. There are two things you need to know about the performance plan. First, it requires perfection to go to heaven, because the

punishment for sin is hell (Rm 6:23). Second, nobody is perfect. In other words, the performance plan doesn't work because if God gave you what you deserved, it would be hell because you are a sinner. You might say, "But I'm not as bad as other people." Maybe so, but that just means that your place in hell won't be as bad as theirs. But it's still hell. The performance plan is like jumping across the Grand Canyon. You may be able to jump farther than others, but you will won't make the distance.

iv. The other way to get to heaven is the grace plan. Grace means "free gift," or "unmerited favor." The grace plan means that God saves you even though you don't deserve it. How do you receive God's grace? By faith. "God saved you by his grace when you believed." To be saved, you must put your faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ on your behalf. To put it negatively, faith in Jesus means you are going to give up the performance plan; you aren't going to put any trust or hope in your goodness, but instead will totally and completely look to Christ for salvation.
v. This morning I'm urging you to pursue goodness; to grow in goodness. But please do not understand. Christians do not pursue goodness to earn salvation. That's legalism, and it is the wrong motive for pursing goodness.
vi. Let me clarify a few things.
    1. God's love isn't based on your goodness. Being good will not cause God to love you any more, and failing to be good won't cause Him to love you any less. God's love for you is not based on who you are, but on who He is.
    2. Your salvation isn't based on your goodness. It's not based on what you have done for God, but on what Christ has done for you.
    3. Keeping your salvation is not based on your goodness. Once God saves you, you cannot lose your salvation. Failing to be good won't cause you to lose your salvation, or to lose the Holy Spirit. Once you become Christ's sheep, nothing can snatch you out of His hand (Jn 10:28-29). Once you get saved, nothing "can separate us from the love of Christ" (Rm 8:31-39).

vii. If we don't pursue goodness to earn heaven, then why? Not to earn salvation, but out of gratitude for salvation. Because of God's great love for us, as demonstrated on the cross, out of gratitude we aim to live in a way that pleases God. Because Jesus Christ has freely saved us from the penalty of sin, the power of sin, and will one day save us completely from the presence of sin, we cannot help but pursue goodness out of loving gratitude.

viii. We pursue goodness in view of God's mercy poured out on us, not to earn His mercy (Rm 12:1).

ix. We pursue goodness because God has adopted us as His children, not to earn our adoption (Eph 5:1).

x. Let me stop right here and ask you a question: If you died today, why should God let you into heaven? If your answer is about your performance, your good deeds, your effort to please God, then you are trusting in the wrong thing. You aren't trusting in Jesus, but in yourself. I encourage you today to turn away from self-reliance; to admit that you are a sinner, you deserve hell, you cannot save yourself, and you need Jesus to save you.

2. Avoid antinomianism.

i. What is antinomianism? It is the combination of two words. "Anti" means against, and "nomos" is the Greek word for law. So antinomianism literally means "against law." It was one of the main false teachings faced in early Christianity. It is the idea that as Christians we don't have to pursue goodness, righteousness, moral excellence. That God doesn't care about how we live.

ii. It's easy to fall into this trap because of what we just talked about:
    1. God's love isn't based on your performance.
    2. Salvation is by grace through faith, not good works.
    3. You cannot lose your salvation by failing to be good.

iii. Therefore, even if you mentally reject antinomianism, it is still easy to unconsciously abuse God's grace and live as if goodness is not important; or at least, not that important.

iv. This is where you need to go back to the Bible and remember that goodness is commanded:
    1. **Romans 12:9** Detest evil; cling to what is good.
    2. **1 Thessalonians 5:21-22** Hold on to what is good. 22 Stay away from every kind of evil.

v. Holiness is commanded:
    1. **2 Cor 7:1** So then, dear friends, since we have these promises, let us cleanse ourselves from every impurity of the flesh and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.
vi. Righteousness is commanded:
    1. **Mt 6:33** But seek first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things will be provided for you.
vii. The New Testament is filled with moral commands. Why? Not for our information, but for our application.
viii. Jesus made it very clear that the way to demonstrate your love for Him is to obey His commands (Jn 14:15).
ix. **R. C. Sproul** (*Reformation Study Bible*) "We frequently hear the statement, 'Christianity isn't a lot of do's and don'ts; it is not a list of rules.' There is some truth in this deduction, inasmuch as Christianity is far more than a mere list of rules. It is, at its center, a personal relationship with Christ Himself. Yet Christianity is also not less than rules. The New Testament clearly includes some do's and don'ts. Christianity is not a religion that sanctions the idea that everyone has the right to do what is right in his own eyes. On the contrary, Christianity never gives anyone the "right" to do what is wrong."
x. In fact, Jesus said only those who do God's will go to heaven.
xi. **Mt 7:21** "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven."
xii. Paul said something similar.
xiii. **1 Cor 6:19** Don't you know that the unrighteous will not inherit God's kingdom?
xiv. Were they saying that you have to earn heaven by being good? No. They were saying that the sincere and wholehearted pursuit of goodness, holiness, righteousness, obedience, is evidence of salvation.
xv. **3 Jn 11** Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil, but what is good. The one who does good is of God; the one who does evil has not seen God.

xvi. To grow in goodness, avoid antinomianism. Make no mistake – goodness is required. It is a command. It is not optional. It is the very proof that you have been saved.

xvii. Let me just stop right here and ask. Is the subject of growing in goodness boring to you? Do you not care about living the way God wants you to live? Are you uninterested in growing more like Christ, and in cleaning the evil out of your life? If so, then you are likely not saved. You may believe in Jesus, but you have likely made the mistake of accepting Jesus as your Savior and at the same time rejecting Him as Lord (Master). If you want to be saved, you must make the decision to accept Christ as the Lord of your life, and hand the steering wheel of your life over to Him.

3. Avoid self-reliance.

i. The next mistake that many Christians make is to try to grow in goodness in their own strength.

ii. **Galatians 5:22-23** 22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, and self-control.

iii. Notice that goodness is a fruit of the Spirit. In other words, it is something the Holy Spirit must produce in you. You can't produce it on your own. The good news is that the Holy Spirit wants to help you grow in goodness. But you have to learn to tap into His power. You have to seek His filling.

iv. **Eph 5:18** "Be filled with the Spirit."

v. To be filled with the Spirit is to be empowered by Him. To grow in goodness you must learn to be continuously filled with the Spirit; to daily tap into His power.

vi. How do you seek the filling of the Holy Spirit?

vii. I cover this from time to time, but it is worth repeating. Theologian Henry Drummond recommends five principles for becoming Spirit-filled with he practices every day:

1. Acknowledge your need for God's power.
2. Abandon all conscious sins.
3. Abdicate the throne of your life.
4. Ask God to fill you with His Spirit.
5. Accept the gift of fullness by faith.

viii. **John 15:5** I am the vine; you are the branches. The one who remains in me and I in him produces much fruit, because you can do nothing without me.

ix. You can do nothing without Jesus. You cannot produce the fruit of goodness and Christlikeness without Jesus. So, He says to "remain" (abide) in Him.

x. What is it to abide in Christ? Maintain a constant, close connection with Jesus. To abide is to draw near and stay close. Jesus is saying that if you will do the work of staying close, He will grow you in goodness.

xi. So your real concern needs to be staying close. How can you stay close to Jesus? Let's start with two essentials: Give Jesus the first day of your week and the first hour of your day. Set aside Sundays to meet with Jesus at church, and don't let anything interfere. And set aside the first hour of each day to meet with Jesus, and guard it with your life. Start there and I guarantee you will grow in goodness.

4. Avoid creativity.

i. What do I mean? Creativity can be a good thing. God is creative – He is the creator of the heavens and the earth. He created 400,000 species of beetles. And God made you to be creative, even though some people are more creative than others. People create songs, and paintings, and structures, and all kinds of things.

ii. But creativity can be a bad thing if you are talking about morality, or righteous character and conduct. When it comes to goodness, you don't get to create your own rules. You don't get to decide how to live, how to treat others, how to talk, how to handle your finances, etc. God has already decided, and He has revealed it in His word.

iii. **2 Timothy 3:16-17** 16 All Scripture is inspired by God, and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness, 17 so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

iv. How can you be trained in righteousness and equipped for every good work? Not by creatively making up your own rules, but by studying scripture. The Bible is our ultimate and final authority for faith and practice. It tells us what to believe, and how to behave. If

you want to grow in goodness, then devote yourself to mastering this book.

v. The New Year is coming up. As we get closer, I'm going to challenge and equip you to make the Bible a priority in your life in 2027. It's going to be a new sermon series called "Back to the Bible: Reignite Your Passion for God's Word." It will be final two Sundays of the year. I'm going to fire you up, and I'm going to challenge you.

5. Avoid isolation.

i. **Hebrews 10:24-25 (NLT)** 24 Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works. 25 And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near.

ii. This verse says two things:
    1. First, it says don't neglect church attendance.
    2. Second, it mentions why you need church. You need motivation for love and good works.

iii. Let's be honest. It's easy to skip church. But let me be very clear: You cannot grow in goodness if you isolate yourself form church. Do you need to go to church to go to heaven? No. But you do need to be actively involved in church to be a healthy, growing Christian; to grow up in goodness and Christlikeness.

iv. Why do you think God wants you to take time out of your busy schedule to go to church? God loves you; He's doesn't want to waste your time. It's because He knows that for you to grow in goodness, in Christlikeness, you need a regular dosage of motivation and encouragement from your church family.

v. If you want to get the most benefit from church, then you need to be engaged in four ways:
    1. Sunday worship.
    2. Home Group.
    3. Volunteer.
    4. Tithing.

vi. Parents, let me talk to you for just a moment. Your mission is to disciple your kids – to help them grow in goodness (in Christlikeness). For your kids to grow, they need to be actively involved in church. A large percentage of kids leave church after

high school. How can you make sure your kids stick? Get them involved in church in those four ways. If your kids aren't involved in all of those things, then will likely leave after high school.

vii. Let me talk about one of those four a little more: Home Groups. If you want to grow in Christ, then you need to get involved in a Home Group. The numbers don't lie:
    1. A 2026 study by Lifeway Research found that frequent small group participants attend worship services more likely, they are more likely to serve in ministry, and they are more likely to read the Bible on their own.
    2. A study by the Unstuck Group found that people in small groups share their faith at nearly 4x the rate of non-participants.

viii. If you want to grow, and if you want your kids to grow, get involved in a Home Group.

ix. Let me talk about our church for a moment. If we are going to reach more people and grow as a church, we not only need to get people in Home Group, we need to start more Home Groups.
    1. People are 5x more likely to stick with a church if they are in a small group (Thom Rainer).
    2. Churches with over 50% of their congregation in a small group grow at almost twice the rate of other churches.

x. To reach more people, we have to start more Home Groups. And that means we need more Home Group leaders. I want you to pray about starting a Home Group.

xi. What are the qualifications of a Home Group leader?
    1. You must be a church member.
    2. You must use the approved curriculum: Either sermon-based curriculum, or you buy a study from Lifeway.
    3. You must attend a quarterly meeting for training and encouragement.

xii. You can start a group for anybody: For men, or for women, or for senior adults, or for gym bros, or for young couples.

xiii. Your group can meet at any time: Any day of the week, at any time. Morning, noon, evening. The only time we don't allow groups is Sunday morning, because we don't want it to keep people from attending or volunteering at church.

xiv. If you really want to accelerate your growth, start a Home Group. If you are interested, then let me know on your Connection Card.

6. Avoid burnout.

i. **Galatians 6:9** Let us not get tired of doing good, for we will reap at the proper time if we don't give up.

ii. This verse implies that it is possible to get tired of the pursuit of goodness. It's possible to get spiritual burnout. To lose your motivation for holiness, righteousness, spiritual growth, etc. It's possible to get tired of going to church, and having a quiet time, and going to Home Group. It's possible to lose your motivation.

iii. How can you avoid spiritual burnout? How can you stay motivated? Remember three truths:

1. The rewards of goodness are worth it.

a. Notice that Gal 6:9 says that we will reap at the proper time. The Bible says that in the final judgment, Christ will reward you for all the good that you do in this life (see also 2 Cor 5:10; Eph 6:8). Nothing that you do for God in this life will be unnoticed or wasted.

2. The consequences of evil are worth avoiding.

a. **1 Peter 3:12 (NIV)** For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.

b. What does it mean that God's face is against those who do evil? When you choose to live in sin, God will discipline you. He will stop answering your prayers. He will remove His provision, protection, and peace. He will go to work to make you miserable until you repent. If you are truly saved, He will make it impossible for you to live in sin and be happy.

3. God is worthy.

a. **1 John 4:19** We love because he first loved us.

b. The greatest motivation for growing in goodness is God's love for us. Therefore, the most effective way to stay motivated is to focus on God's love for you. Spend a lot of time praising and thanking God for all that He has done for you. For the cross, forgiveness,

new life, freedom, eternal life, the Bible, material blessings, healing, deliverance, etc.

c. Don't waste Sunday worship. It's possible to be at church physically, but not mentally and spiritually and emotionally. When worship begins, focus all your attention on the goodness of God and praise the Lord with your whole heart. That praise will energize you and encourage you to keep going in the pursuit of goodness.

V. CONCLUSION

1. I've given you a lot to chew on today. Let's review.
2. God wants you to grow in goodness – in good character and conduct; in Christlikeness; moral excellence; righteousness. He wants you to be an expert in goodness.
3. How can you grow in goodness? Avoid six mistakes:
    i. Legalism: Pursue goodness for the right reason.
    ii. Antinomianism: Remember that God deeply cares about your character and conduct.
    iii. Self-reliance: Every day seek the filling of the Spirit and abide in Christ.
    iv. Creativity: Get your code of conduct from the Bible.
    v. Isolation: Get involved in church, especially Home Group
    vi. Burnout: Focus on all that God has done for you.
4. I want to ask you two questions to help you apply this to your life:
    i. First, what is the most important change you could make that would help you grow in goodness? Don't worry about whether or not you will do it, just write down the one change that, if you made it, would help you grow in Christ more than anything else.
        1. Maybe you need to repent of a sin.
        2. Maybe you need to give up a habit.
        3. Maybe you need to change your schedule.
        4. Maybe you need to get in a Home Group.
        5. Maybe you need to become a Home Group leader.
        6. Maybe you need to obey a command, like baptism, or tithing.
        7. Maybe you need to join the church.
        8. Maybe you need to start having a daily quiet time.

9. --- Whatever your answer is

ii. Second, is God worthy of that change?

5. Before we close, I want you take out your Connection Card. I want to encourage you to fill it out and turn it in as you leave.
    i. Write down your prayer requests.
    ii. Sign up for baptism.
    iii. Sign up for the Newcomer's Lunch.
    iv. Request info about Home Group.
    v. Let me know if you are interested in being a Home Group leader.
    vi. If nothing else, just write your name and turn it in to encourage others.