Just a brief preamble before I begin the sermon. I want to let you know up front that I’ve taken a slight detour from the originally intended focus of this message. I trust that this was a Spirit-led decision. I was going to talk about the virtue of goodness as it relates to the life focus area of body and soul care. While I’m still going to be talking about goodness, I won’t be applying that virtue to a specific life focus area today. As my sermon was coming together, it seemed like God had something else in mind for this morning. So allow me to begin by saying:

Oh, My. Goodness.

Do you ever use that phrase? As in:

“Oh my goodness. Another federal election?”

“Oh my goodness. Donald Trump wants to run for President?”

I use the phrase quite a bit with my kids:

“Oh my goodness, which one of you tracked all this mud into the house?”

“Oh my goodness, Nicole, didn’t you clean your room just yesterday? Look at it now. What happened?”

“Oh my goodness, Matthew, for the seventh time, no you can’t have more Easter chocolate!”

When Ryan was younger, it used to be, “Buddy, in the future, please make sure you pull your pants back up before you exit the washroom. Especially when we have company. My goodness!”

I often use the phrase with the dog as well. Like the other week, when in the middle of the night, we discovered that Ginger had somehow gotten into Jan’s purse, removed and then ate half a bar of dark chocolate. So we went online to find out what to do—because chocolate is supposed to be bad for dogs—and the first article we found suggested that our dog had about two hours left to live. Oh my goodness. In the end, Ginger was fine. She hadn’t eaten enough to harm her. Thank goodness.

Here’s another one: I was cleaning up the backyard the other week after the snow had all melted. You see, over the winter, doggie... deposits... get embedded in the different layers of snow, so you can imagine what you’re left with when all those layers melt away. I found myself saying: “Oh my goodness! How is it possible that that much poo can come out of a 10-pound animal?”

“My goodness.” A strange phrase, isn’t it? What my goodness, what Steve Shaw’s goodness, has to do with any of the things I just mentioned, I have no idea. But like me, most of us mindlessly toss that phrase around all the time. As author Mark Buchanan writes, “Goodness has grown dull, so bland, so shapeless, it is almost void, without form.”

During the Monica Lewinsky scandal, pollsters asked Americans what they thought of Bill Clinton. The majority felt he was “a good leader, but not a good man.” What they probably meant was that they thought he was competent at being President, but lacked integrity as a person. They saw him as man of skill and ability—but not of character.

And so the question might be asked, is it possible to be a good leader, but not a good person? From a biblical perspective, it’s not. In fact, when I was in Nicaragua the other month, I conducted a seminar on Christian leadership. The thrust of that seminar was that contrary to so many of today’s books and conferences on leadership—both secular and Christian—the Bible almost exclusively focuses on character when it comes to leadership. We tend to emphasize that the most important thing about a leader is his or her competence; his or her ability to get things done. While there is a place for that, scripture denounces many so-called competent leaders—including eloquent speakers, shrewd statesmen, and brilliant military strategists—because they lacked character. Or to put it another way, they lacked goodness. Other leaders in the Bible—while perhaps less impressive in terms of skill—are nevertheless praised because they sought and obeyed God. They were men and women of character. They weren’t just good at their roles. They were good.

So goodness, the way the Bible sees it, has little to do with competence, and everything to do with character.

We’re concerned about looking good, and feeling good. We may even attempt to do good. But God wants us to be good. God wants me to be good.

Oh. My. Goodness.

For the past several weeks at Cornerstone, we’ve been exploring the virtue of faith. Today, as is already quite clear, we’re moving on to speak about another biblical virtue—the virtue that the New International Version of the Bible translates as “goodness.” Throughout this sermon series, which is called, “Glory: Illuminating Life with God’s Virtue,” we are unpacking each of the character virtues listed in 2 Peter chapter 1, considering how they can be developed and applied in various areas of our lives—work, family life, friendships, the way we care for our bodies and souls, and so on.

Let’s review that 2 Peter chapter 1 passage now, shall we? We’ll look specifically at verses 3-8. This should be sounding really familiar to most of you by now. Please follow along as I read it:
His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Our overarching theme this year at Cornerstone is *Imago Dei*, a Latin term meaning “image of God.” We’ve been talking about the incredible significance of the fact that you and I have been created in God’s image. Even though God’s image in us has become terribly distorted because of sin, God desires to transform us so that we increasingly reflect the image and likeness of His Son, Jesus Christ, in every aspect, in every dimension, of our lives. And Jesus is the very image of God, says scripture. He fully and perfectly reveals who God is. We are called to partner with God, to cooperate with him, as he works to shape our character to reflect more and more of the virtuous character of Jesus.

This passage shows that God has given us everything we need for a godly life—a life that increasingly reflects the character of Jesus. But it’s up to us to avail ourselves of all that God has given, and therefore Peter exhorts us in this passage to make every effort—to strive, to go all out—in order to add to our faith the whole list of Christlike virtues we just read about. If you look at the passage, you’ll see that the first virtue we are called to add to our faith is… goodness.

We’ve already talked about how we tend to use the English word “goodness” in a rather nebulous manner. And we’ve already talked about how biblical goodness is really all about a person’s character. The original Greek word that Peter employs in this text is *arete*. Some English versions of the Bible translate this word as goodness, as we’ve seen. Others translate it as excellence, and still others translate it as virtue. Since we’re going to be talking about *arete* for the next several weeks, let’s delve into what it means a bit further.

Goodness, in its biblical sense, has to do with moral excellence. But more precisely, it has to do with fulfillment of purpose. For example, the purpose of a knife is to… cut. A “good” knife then—an *arete* knife—is a knife that cuts well. It doesn’t matter how beautiful the handle, or how shiny the blade. If a knife can’t fulfill its primary purpose—to cut—it is not a good knife, an *arete* knife.

A fishing boat is considered good only if it… floats. Its powerful motor, snazzy paint job, and expensive fishing tackle are of little consequence if the boat doesn’t float. A good boat, an *arete* boat, is a boat that fulfills its primary purpose. It floats.

So when Peter says, “make every effort to add to your faith goodness,” it’s an exhortation for us to live on purpose. Can you see why goodness would be the very first virtue that we should endeavor to add to our faith—to our basic belief and trust in Jesus Christ? Unless we’re clear on what our primary purpose is, and committed to fulfilling it, we’ll have no chance of living out the rest of the virtues on Peter’s list. How can your fishing boat make it out to sea for a record catch if it doesn’t float? Our “goodness”, then, is directly related to how well we are fulfilling God’s primary purpose for us.

Which begs the question: What is God’s purpose for us? Before we can live on purpose, we need to know our purpose. To find out what our purpose is, we need to explore the use of the word *arete* in the New Testament just a little bit more. It won’t take long, because the word only appears five times in the entire New Testament, and three are right here in this passage. In verse 5 it says, “…*add to your faith goodness, and to goodness knowledge…*” So that’s two. And then back in verse 3 it says, God’s “divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and [arete].”

Jesus Christ has called us by his own “glory and goodness.” Those two words—glory and goodness, are basically synonymous. The title of this sermon series is “glory” which refers to the manifestation of God’s majesty and his praiseworthy character. Goodness, as we have seen, also has to do with character—in this case *arete* is referring to the praiseworthy character of Jesus. Out of his own glory and goodness—out of his own praiseworthy character—Jesus has called us. In that calling, we find our purpose. What is it?

We only need to look at one more instance of the word *arete* in the New Testament to find out. It also comes from the pen of Peter, who in his first letter, wrote this (1 Peter 2:9):

*But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises [arete] of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.* (NIV)

That’s how the NIV translates it. And I’d like to show you the same passage in two other translations to help clarify its meaning further. Here’s how the New Living Translation puts it:

*But you are a chosen people. You are royal priests, a holy nation, God’s very own possession. As a result, you can show others the goodness [arete] of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light.* (NLT)

And here’s how the Amplified Version puts it:
But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a dedicated nation, [God’s] own purchased, special people, that you may set forth the wonderful deeds and display the virtues and perfections [arete] of Him Who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light. (AMP)

Our purpose, therefore, is to set forth and display the goodness of Jesus—his wonderful deeds, his praiseworthy virtues, his character—in and through our lives. As Pastor Jim Berg says, “Our one major purpose on earth is to become like Christ in character and then by our manner of life show others what Christ is like so that they might honor him too” (Essential Virtues). Or, to borrow the words of Cornerstone’s theme for 2011, our one major purpose is to reflect Jesus in all of life.

The Apostle Paul puts it this way in Romans 8:29 (MSG): God knew what he was doing from the very beginning. He decided from the outset to shape the lives of those who love him along the same lines as the life of his Son. The Son stands first in the line of humanity he restored. We see the original and intended shape of our lives there in him.

So again, my goodness is directly related to how well I am fulfilling God’s purpose for me, and his purpose for me is to reflect the character of Jesus Christ in all aspects of my life, for the sake of others. Not only is Jesus God, you see; he’s also the perfect human being. True human goodness then, is Christlikeness. Your purpose and mine, is to pursue growth in Christlikeness.

It doesn’t really matter how smart, how wealthy, how accomplished we are in our field, or how many people admire or appreciate us. If we aren’t displaying the character of Christ in our lives, we are living at odds with our God-given purpose. If we are not displaying the character of Christ in our lives, we lack goodness; we lack arete.

To add to our faith goodness, therefore, is to come to the realization that we are on earth for a single purpose—growth in Christlikeness—and to wholeheartedly commit ourselves to that purpose. To add to our faith goodness is to come to a point of single-minded commitment to become like Christ—and to do whatever it takes on our part for that to happen. “Make every effort,” says Peter, “to add to your faith, goodness.” Live on purpose. Bible commentator Douglas Moo writes, “Peter’s point is clear: Spiritual growth is not a matter that Christians can treat lightly; it’s a goal to which we need to give ourselves, body and soul, every day of our lives.”

This call to goodness, to arete, to living on purpose, to single-minded commitment to become like Christ—often seems like pie-in-the-sky idealism that cannot be expected of mere mortals. “It’s for super-Christians, maybe,” you might be thinking, “but it’s not for normal Christians like me.” Listen. The spiritual lukewarmness that pervades the church today may be normal in light of the attitudes of prevailing culture, but by biblical standards it is not. The single-minded pursuit of becoming like Christ isn’t superstar Christianity; it’s normal Christianity.

It’s the Christianity of Jesus, who says, “If anyone [not superstar Christians but anyone] would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23).

It’s the Christianity of the Apostle Paul, who says, “I count all [other] things as rubbish that I may gain Christ and be found in him” (Philippians 3:8-9) and who also says, “Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:14).

Through the Apostle John, the Spirit of Jesus sharply challenged the church of Laodicea in the book of Revelation, because their spiritual lukewarmness amounted not to not normal, but rather abnormal, Christianity:

“I know you inside and out,” said Jesus to this church, “and find little to my liking. You’re not cold, you’re not hot—far better to be either cold or hot! [just like a drink is good either hot or cold, but not lukewarm.] You’re stale. You’re stagnant. You make me want to vomit. You brag, ‘I’m rich, I’ve got it made, I need nothing from anyone,’ oblivious that in fact you’re a pitiful, blind beggar, threadbare and homeless. Here’s what I want you to do: Buy your gold from me, gold that’s been through the refiner’s fire. Then you’ll be rich. Buy your clothes from me, clothes designed in Heaven [the clothing of Christlike character]. You’ve gone around half-naked long enough. And buy medicine for your eyes from me so you can see, really see [because you’ve been blind to your true condition; blind to the fact that you’re missing the whole point of why God put you here on earth in the first place—to grow in Christlikeness]. "The people I love, I call to account—prod and correct and guide so that they’ll live at their best. Up on your feet, then! About face! Run after God! (Revelation 3:15-19, MSG).

How many of you have the guts to admit that when I read that passage, it was no longer just about what Jesus once said to the ancient church of Laodicea—it was suddenly about what the risen Christ has to say to you right now? My hand’s up…

Before I continue on with the rest of this message, I’d like to take a few moments for a special exercise of prayer and commitment. The ushers are going to be passing around baskets containing little white flags in them, and I’d like everyone in the house to take one.

While those are being passed around, allow me to say a few words. Scripture is clear on what God’s primary purpose is for you and me as Christ followers—to become like Jesus, so we can show forth his praiseworthy character to the world. Our lives should be reflecting more and more of Jesus’ beauty, so that together, we become a church community that exudes such an attractive alternative to the prevailing culture’s way of life that people are drawn to him through us. Sadly, the church today is too often shaped by prevailing culture rather than the other way around. Yes, at Cornerstone we are going to build a community center style facility to help us connect with and reach our community for Jesus. But if we as a church body miss our primary purpose for growing in Christlike character, we will reach very few people for Jesus, and that building will end up being nothing more than a shell; a very expensive shell. And so, for most of this year, we’re emphasizing the priority of reflecting Jesus in all of life.
And what I believe God has in mind for us this morning, is to recalibrate as to purpose—both personally, and corporately. He offers us the gift this morning of a recalibration time. Because many of us, if we’re honest, have been living according to our own purposes rather than our God-given primary purpose—the pursuit of Christlikeness—a purpose we don’t take very seriously sometimes, if it’s even on the radar screen at all. Too many of us see it as just one of many competing purposes in our lives, and so the one purpose that should be taking up our best efforts and energies gets short shrift. Sometimes, the pursuit of Christlikeness, at best, gets our leftovers.

I’m going to give you a chance now, to declare anew your desire, your intention to live on purpose, to live, above all else, for growth in Christlikeness. How much do you really want it? Many of you, if you’re honest, would have to say, deep down, probably not all that much. Still, you can use this moment to turn that honest confession into a heartfelt prayer. “Lord, I may not want to live on purpose right now, but I want to want it.” The Lord can work with that, even if you just want to want it.

The virtue of goodness—areté—is about living on purpose. So if you sense God prompting you to use this opportunity to declare anew your intention to live for the pursuit of Christlike character, I’d like you to write some or all of the following on either or both sides of your flag:

- The words: “My purpose is CHRISTLIKENESS.”
- If it applies, also write: “Lord, I want to want it. Help me want it!”
- Or, you may wish to write the words: “Whatever it takes.”
- Signature and date

Now, after we do this exercise, I’ll have a little more teaching to cover this morning. But for now, take this opportunity to tell the Lord your desire, your intention to recalibrate your life according to your primary purpose—the pursuit of Christlikeness—with God helping you. Richard’s going to come and play, and I’ll give you 2 minutes to write what you need to write on those flags of surrender…

And now, I’d like to ask everyone to bow for a moment of prayer. All eyes are closed, please. I want to give you a special moment with the Lord. For those of you who have made some kind of declaration to the Lord on your flag about arete this morning, about adding to your faith goodness, about renewing your commitment to live on purpose—and your purpose is growth in Christlikeness—just lift your flag up to the Lord right now and hold it up until I say to take it down…

We need moments of commitment like this, because they are moments that stand out, and we remember them. That’s why it’s important to make the most of opportunities like this when they come along. This is not a gimmick; it’s a God moment to help your commitment register in your heart and mind in a way it wouldn’t if I just said, “Please do you best do live on purpose,” and left it at that. I want to give a moment for anyone else to lift their flag of surrender to live on purpose up to Jesus now…

God bless you; you can take your flags down.

Next, I ask you to keep your flag—take it home today, and put in a place where it will remind you of the declaration, of the commitment (or re-commitment) you’ve made this morning.

Maybe you didn’t lift your flag up this morning. Maybe you didn’t write anything down, or really participate much in this exercise. That’s just where you’re at, and the Jesus loves you all the same. Nonetheless, I want to encourage you—if you have the guts—to keep this flag as well. Let its presence on your bedroom dresser or your desk drawer or wherever—get you thinking about why you perhaps have reservations about making the pursuit of Christlikeness your number one priority. Let its presence be a means by which the Holy Spirit can challenge you so that you might get to the point of picking it up, and lifting it up to the Lord. Or, as a first step, getting you to pray, “Lord, I may not want to live on purpose right now, I lift this flag and pray, that I want to want it.” Amen.

The purpose of Christlikeness is a high standard, no doubt, but we must remember our main passage in 2 Peter which says that God has already given us everything we need for a godly life. God holds nothing back when it comes to his part of the deal. God can be fully trusted to do for us what only he can do. But we cannot, we must not, be passive in the matter. We must not sit there and expect God to zap us into spiritual maturity. Our responsibility, says Peter, is to “make every effort to add to our faith goodness,” to do whatever it takes to live in line with our God-given purpose of becoming more and more like Jesus in character.

Let me be clear: I cannot transform myself by my own efforts, and neither can you. That’s God’s job. But in order for God to transform me, here’s what I must do, and these words come from author Ruth Haley Barton: I must “create the conditions in which spiritual transformation can take place, by developing and maintaining a rhythm of spiritual practices that keep me open to God.” Or, to put it in the words of Cornerstone’s mission statement, our job is “Creating space for Jesus to shape us…”

Barton continues with these insightful words that are worth careful consideration:

Living into what we want in any area of life requires some kind of intentional approach. Building a solid financial base, retirement planning, home improvements, career advancements, further education, losing weight or becoming more fit—all these require a plan if we are to make any progress in achieving what we desire. The desire of a life that creates space for God’s transforming work is no different. However, if we look closely at the way we live day today, we may well notice that our approach to spiritual transformation is much more random and haphazard than our approach to finances, home improvements, and weight loss. Many of us try to shove spiritual transformation into the nooks and crannies of a life that is
already unmanageable, rather than being willing to arrange our life for what our heart wants most. We think that somehow, we will fall into transformation by accident.

This is the major problem of the church today. We have a random, haphazard approach to growth in Christlikeness. We have plans for other priorities in our lives, but we have no plans for growth in Christlikeness. What can you do to plan to create space to get close and stay close to Jesus, because again, you can’t transform yourself. The Spirit of Jesus alone is the source of our growth in goodness, or any other virtue for that matter. Our job is to engage create the spaces that open our lives up to his transforming presence. We do this through spiritual disciplines, such as prayer, Bible intake, personal and corporate worship, serving, and Sabbath-keeping—which, for those of you who heard my sermon on that the other week, I’m three weeks into my new Sabbath practice now and I’m becoming more spiritually healthy because of it. Living on purpose, you see, requires an intentional approach—the development of rhythms of spiritual practice that keep us open to God. It requires prayerful self-assessment, realistic goal-setting, thoughtful planning and resource procurement, and of course follow-through. It requires having the discussions we need to with our family members to ensure our plan can work. It requires seeking out people to help us where we need help—maybe to help us with our self-assessment, our goals, our planning, to recommend resources to us, with accountability and so forth. The pursuit of growth in Christlikeness is similar to any other undertaking in life. An intentional approach is required, just like it is if we want to learn new language or become proficient on a musical instrument, run a marathon, buy a house, or develop expertise in our chosen career field.

APPLICATIONS:

To help you in this, we’ll be offering some opportunities for you here at Cornerstone:

- Sacred Rhythms Summer Semester group
- Cornerstone Prayer Book
- Reflecting Jesus in All of Life Assessment Tool