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Sermon Transcript: Good Deeds

How you doing? I'm pretty good. Are you—are you good? Let's try to put some numbers to it. What do you say when you think about your personal spiritual standing with God? Your personal—spiritual standing with God. How would you rate yourself on a scale of 1 to 10? Let's put a number to it. Everybody get there? You just—you don't have to say it out loud. True confession.

Here's what I noticed: the tens are talking out loud. The ones had their mouths shut. Don't you—did you notice that one? All right, everyone. Just hold it in your head. You got it? All right. Now, here's—this is fun. Let's do this: I want you to add two to whatever number you came up with that puts you over the top. Just think about that. What if someone were to have that kind of rating? What does that look like? Is there someone from your past, or someone that you know in this congregation right now, or just someone you know out there in the world that you would put at that level of spiritual standing with God? Put a face to that. Not just a—don't just think of the number. Put a face to it, how you would see that.

This will be even more fun: now, subtract two from your number. I know this seems like a math contest, but you can do this. I believe in you. Whatever your rating for yourself was, subtract two from that. Do you know that person? Can you think of someone who's like, you know, just in your mind, just like not quite—maybe could step up? I don't know. For some of you, this is very difficult. And for some of you, this is very easy.

The Dangerous "I'm Sorry, But..."

How many of you are "I'm sorry, but'ers? Let me explain. How many of you have been known to start a sentence with "I'm sorry, but" with that, like, righteous indignation? For example: "I'm sorry, but she wore white to my wedding." Or: "I'm sorry, but I didn't like that music at all." Or: "I'm sorry, but I don't like her husband, so I'm not inviting them to the party." Or: "I'm sorry, but he's the one that started it." I'm sorry, but...

Rarely are "I'm sorry, but apologies about interrupting to say something kind, like: "I'm sorry, but I just needed to tell you that you did a great job." Or: "I'm sorry, but those shoes are fabulous." More often, "I'm sorry, but" is where we do this fake apology beforehand, trying to kind of soften the thing that we're going to say—the hurtful thing that we're going to say—and then we say it anyway. It's like we know, we know that we shouldn't say what we're going to say, but we just can't help ourselves. And so we say it anyway, but we say, "I'm sorry, but" just to kind of soften it up a little bit.

A Different Type of Good Deed

Well, often at churches, we like to talk about good deeds as action, faith in action: holding the door open for someone, taking someone a meal, raking leaves, giving them a ride. All of these are good deeds. All of them are living our faith in action. All of them require a sacrifice of something from us, whether it's physical energy, or time, money, or all of the above.

But today, I want to bring your attention to a different type of good deed—so, we're talking about good deeds, that's the title—I want to talk about a different type of good deed: a type that requires an emotional and spiritual sacrifice. A type that requires an ego check. A good deed where there may not be a physical

product that comes about like a mowed lawn, but there might be an emotional product like forgiveness or a change in a relationship.

And in Philemon, Paul urges Philemon and us to do the right thing, says in verse 8, and that our good deeds might be voluntary and not forced, verse 14, and that they are done out of love, verse 9. And this letter from Paul to Philemon is not talking about those tangible good deeds like mowing a lawn or taking a meal—at least, that is not the main focus of the letter. So what are these good deeds? Because Paul is not urging Philemon to take a meal or rake the yard, but to reconcile with Onesimus, who it seems may have wronged Philemon in some way.

And reconcile is kind of a word that we don't use often. Reconcile meaning to repair and restore a broken relationship. And I say that Onesimus somehow wronged Philemon because as Pastor Rob said last week, there's a variety of ways to interpret Philemon. There are multiple ways to understand this letter. And maybe Onesimus was a runaway slave, as is a kind of common interpretation. But another way to interpret it is maybe this is a letter talking about the healing of broken relationships within the faith family of Christ. Paul uses a lot of language in this letter that is very familiar; he talks about being brothers. And so maybe Philemon and Onesimus were friends, and Onesimus started a fight with Philemon. The term slave is only really used once. And so there's a variety of ways to interpret this letter.

Putting the Fake Apology Aside

But however we interpret this letter, there was something relationally broken between Onesimus and Philemon, or Paul wouldn't have felt compelled to write this letter at all. And I wonder if when writing this letter, Paul might have been trying to head off Philemon's "I'm sorry, but"—"I'm sorry, but Onesimus ran away," or "I'm sorry, but I'm within my social rights as a slave owner to punish him," or "I'm sorry, but Onesimus started it," or "I'm sorry, but I just can't see things the same way as him, and I just—I can't even..."

I imagine that Philemon was going to be ready with an "I'm sorry, but," and Paul knew that. And so Paul appealed to Philemon's faith in Christ and the fact that they all three of them—Philemon, Onesimus, and Paul—were brothers through Jesus Christ. And so Paul urges Philemon to put that "I'm sorry, but" aside and welcome Onesimus back as exactly who Onesimus was: a brother in Christ.

It's a good deed—a good deed to reconcile with someone when you have a broken relationship. It's a good deed, and it's one that requires emotional and spiritual maturity. One that requires sacrificing the ego and perhaps that righteous indignation that we often like to have. Paul urges Philemon to do the hard thing emotionally and spiritually. Philemon is being encouraged to forgive Onesimus for any grudge or debt or wrongdoing that has occurred. And I think that's often a lot harder than taking a meal or mowing a lawn. It's a different type of sacrifice. It's a sacrifice of ego, of feeling like we have to be the one that's right. It's a good deed where reconciliation is prioritized over other things. Relationship is prioritized over other things—kind of like how God prioritizes and reconciles with us.

Culture Versus the Call of Romans

So, I think that this good deed—this type of good deed that we don't often talk about—almost feels harder. Although, I've never mowed a lawn before, so I don't know, maybe I would feel differently if I had. But I think this emotional and spiritual maturity can be really hard, especially since our culture has really encouraged us to focus on ourselves and our wants and our desires. We say things like "You do you" and "YOLO," which

for those of you that don't know, it means "You only live once," or "I'm living my best life." A common theme in those sayings is that what I want and my desires are first and foremost the priority. We are going to live our lives to please ourselves, to maximize doing what we want to do.

So I think that helps us to feel emboldened, justified to share a hurtful opinion or to hold a grudge and explain it away with an "I'm sorry, but..." But you know what the Bible says? You know what God tells us? Our Romans passage puts it this way: "You who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor."

We should focus less on doing what pleases us and more on putting up with other people. To put it in other words, it says that—that this translation of the "failings of the weak" is kind of tricky. And I think a better translation of that Greek word could be those who are without power, whether physical, emotional, or spiritual. And it makes me think of those instances when you probably have been in a situation like this, where you're in a meeting or just a conversation, and you say something and you put your foot in your mouth—I do it all the time—and we say something maybe we shouldn't have said, and instead of someone berating us or making fun of us or making it really awkward, they graciously move on and they don't make a big deal out of it. They put up with what comes out of our mouth. And I think that that is a good deed: that is a putting up with the failings of the weak in a group interaction type setting.

God Never Says "I'm Sorry, But"

So that's good deeds. And so this week, I want to encourage you to practice this different type of good deed: one where there isn't a clear physical or tangible product or result, but an emotional and spiritual one, a relational one.

So, I want you to think: Who have you said about, "I'm sorry, but..."? Who have you maybe talked about them behind their back and said that to someone else? "I'm sorry, but they..." Who have you said that about recently that needs to be forgiven? If Paul were writing this letter to you, imploring you to do the right thing out of love, to do a good deed in your relationship with someone, who might that be?

The good news this morning is that regardless of what you've done, God doesn't say, "I'm sorry, but..." God sets the example, and we are merely called to follow.

So, let's save the "I'm sorry, but"s for telling people that their shoes are fabulous or saying something nice, and do some good deeds this week.

Amen.

Amen.