

## 8 ||| Goodness

When I was a little boy, my mother taught me to pray, "God is great, God is good, and we thank Thee for this food." This simple prayer makes a simple statement about God, yet it is remarkably profound and sophisticated in the depth of its theology. God is not only great, but God is good. This kind of goodness goes beyond the functional, pragmatic goodness discussed in the last chapter. It involves moral goodness.

### God Is Good

The idea that God is good has been the object of speculation and debate for centuries upon centuries. The Greek philosophers argued about the nature of goodness thousands of years ago. Socrates, Plato, Euripides, and Aristotle all contemplated and argued and tried to decide what constitutes "the good." They also wanted to know how a person knows what is good. Discerning goodness was as important for them as describing goodness.

#### *The Standard for Goodness: What Is Good?*

The debate inevitably leads to the question of whether or not some universal standard or ideal exists whereby God may be judged to be good. How does a person decide whether or not God is good, and what standard is used in determining it? If such a standard exists for judging God, and if such a standard can be perceived and understood, then that standard or ideal or principle would be greater than God. It would be the judge of God. It would be the God of God.

Christian ethicists have argued whether or not God submits to a moral code of behavior. Such a code would keep God in line and let God know what can and cannot be done. It would be a way for God to know good and evil. It would be a guide to instruct God's decision-

making. It would help ensure that God would do what was expected of Him. Such a code or principle or ideal would imply that God is capable of evil. Is there a universal principle to which even God submits?

Jesus addressed this question point blank. Without dealing with any of the turns and twists of the argument or the subtleties of the debate, Jesus gave a simple dogmatic answer: "Behold, one came up to him, saying, 'Teacher, what good deed must I do, to have eternal life?' And he said to him, 'Why do you ask me about *what* is good? One there is *who* is good' " (Matt. 19:16-17, author's italics).

The young man asked for a standard. He wanted the comfort of a moral code. If Jesus would provide a list of what constituted goodness, he could take care of the rest. The question the young man asked was taking him away from the thing he sought. He looked for goodness in terms of a standard or principle. He looked for a *what* instead of a *who*.

#### *The Nature of Goodness: Who Is Good?*

Mark recorded the same or similar encounter in the Gospel. His account stresses another dimension of the great debate:

As he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up, knelt before him, and asked, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call *me* good? No one is good but God alone" (Mark 10:17-18).

Jesus insisted that the young man clarify in his mind the only circumstance under which Jesus might be called good. If Jesus was only a famous teacher, then He had no right to be called good. If Jesus was only a well-known and prominent rabbi, then He had no right to be called good. He did not want flattery. Only one being in all of existence is morally good, and that being is God. Moral goodness is a unique attribute of God. No other person and no other thing is morally good.

In Matthew, Jesus stressed that things are not good. No principle or ideal of goodness exists independently of God. Only God is good. In Mark, Jesus stressed that people are not good. No matter how great teachers may be, they are not good. Only God is good. Goodness is a unique characteristic of who God is. Goodness is a quality of God that only exists because God exists.

Through His exchange with the young man, Jesus sought to help the young man understand whom he was addressing and what goodness had to do with Him. Jesus was good for a special reason. Jesus shared life with the Father. Goodness was an essential part of Jesus because of His relationship to God. He was not good because of the good deeds He did. Jesus did good deeds because He was good. It was His nature; the nature He shared with God. It is this nature that He came to share with people.

The young man was engaged in an exercise in futility, trying to be good by doing good deeds. A bad tree cannot bear good fruit. A good tree cannot help but bear good fruit. That is its nature (Matt. 7:17-18).

Goodness does not come by knowing what is good. Goodness in a person does not result from the careful arrival at a code of behavior. Goodness begins in knowing God. What God does and what God says is what goodness is. Goodness is shown by God in His activity. Goodness, then, is not an ideal standard for evaluating God; rather, God is the standard for understanding goodness.

### **The Knowledge of Good and Evil**

Since the beginning of time, however, it has been the human habit to determine values independently of God. The problem goes back to Adam and Eve as they desired to be like God. The serpent dangled a fascinating idea before them—the promise that they would know good and evil, just like God. The idea caught their fancy, and they ate the fruit of the tree of knowledge in order to know good and evil. Then their eyes were open to good and evil. In this act of sin, their relationship with God was broken.

God is the source of wisdom, understanding, and truth. Adam and Eve had none of these. Throughout the Bible, God reveals the problem of having knowledge without wisdom, understanding, and truth. The absence of these ingredients makes even knowledge invalid. This was the charge that God laid on Job: “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?” (Job 38:2). In Nineveh the same problem arose because the people did not know “their right hand from their left” (Jonah 4:11).

*Goodness Is More Than Knowledge*

Goodness involves more than mere knowledge. It requires more than a factual understanding of a moral code. A person may have a thorough knowledge of an ethical system and still be an evil person. Jesus asked the young man who came to Him if he knew the commandments, and the young man did. That knowledge did not make him good. A person may also do good deeds and still be an evil person. Evil people are capable of doing good deeds. The young man who came to Jesus had done the good deeds of the Law, but the deeds did not make him good.

Goodness involves more than our knowledge or our actions. It goes down deep to our very nature. Goodness is an essential ingredient of a person, like blood and bone, or it is not present at all. The knowledge of good and evil does nothing to affect our nature. Knowledge is just the playground in which people act out what they are really like.

For example, a person may know it is wrong to steal. For four years I served as chaplain in a prison full of men who knew it was wrong to steal. Their problem had not been one of ignorance or misinformation. They had knowledge, but that knowledge had no affect on them. Many of the men at the prison knew it was wrong to rape, but that knowledge had not affected their lives. Any number of crimes can be cataloged in which people knew their actions were wrong but performed the acts in spite of their knowledge.

*The Failure of Human Nature*

Since goodness involves something other than a mere legal code or moral code, the failure of knowledge to bring goodness can also be witnessed in places other than in prisons. Not all failures of goodness are categorized as human crimes. Of the fifteen works of the flesh that Paul mentions in Galatians 5:19-21, none are considered crimes in modern America. The knowledge of these bad things and others like them does little to diminish their occurrence. "Nice" people may know what they ought to do and still not do it, even if they want to do it.

This failure of human nature was the great lament of Paul in the seventh chapter of Romans. He had knowledge of the moral will of God. He knew the Law, and the Law revealed the righteousness of

God. The young man who came to Jesus had the same knowledge, but he had not reached the point of Paul, who knew he was not living totally in the righteousness of God. Paul had the knowledge, but it did him no good. He was not able to do the good he wanted to do! He cried out about his dilemma:

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. So then it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do (Rom. 7:15-19).

Paul made an important qualification, that goodness does not dwell "in my flesh." It is not a part of the natural human animal. Paul had come face-to-face with the failure of the human will and the failure of human nature. He recognized that goodness is something different from what people are. Goodness eludes us, even when we crave it.

### *Settling for Less*

As a result, people have tended to settle for something less than the goodness they crave. We have made goodness a relative idea so that something is good compared to something else. We can compare ourselves with others and come up looking pretty good. If we compare Franklin Roosevelt to Adolf Hitler, Roosevelt looks good. On the other hand, a Republican might compare Roosevelt with Herbert Hoover and prefer Hoover. Of course, a Democrat probably would not share that opinion.

Everything becomes relative when placed on a human level. On that level, goodness ceases to be an absolute eternal quality and becomes merely a way of saying what we like. If I like something, it is good. If I do not like it, it is bad. So it is not a universal ideal which we want to tell us what constitutes goodness. In the end, people want to be the judges.

This trap of settling for something less snares many people. It can even snare Christians when they let themselves become judges of what is good and what is bad. The excuse for avoiding Christian fellowship, worship, and servant responsibilities sounds similar to the excuse given for never becoming a Christian: "I am just as good as they are."

First of all, the excuse is true. I eagerly agree anytime I hear that excuse given. I heartily agree every time I hear a nominal Christian give that excuse for not becoming a part of the body of believers gathered in a local church.

Unfortunately, that excuse is the bad news. To be just as good as everybody else is a confession of guilt, sin, and need. If we are only as good as everybody else, we are in deep need, as Paul understood. If we are as good as everybody else, we stand in a hopeless position:

“None is righteous, no, not one;  
no one understands, no one seeks for God.  
All have turned aside, together they have gone wrong;  
no one does good, not even one” (Rom. 3:10-12).

What an easy standard we set when we ask to be as good as everybody else. It sounds like my physical fitness schedule. I walk to work at least once a week. I live only a hundred yards from my office, but I manage to reach my standard. Unfortunately, my standard does me no good.

### **Sharing God's Goodness**

This situation leaves people in a curious quandary. If no one is good, how can goodness be something God expects of us? It does not seem fair, somehow.

#### *Becoming Children of God*

Perhaps the solution to the quandary lies in the passage in which the word *goodness* is found. It is described by Paul as being one of the characteristics of the fruit of the Spirit. The fruit is something that the Spirit produces, and goodness is one thing that can be said of the life that the Spirit produces. Just as an apple tree produces one kind of fruit, the Spirit of God produces one kind of fruit: children of God.

Though an apple tree produces only one kind of fruit, many things may describe that fruit when it is fully mature. An apple may be round, red, firm, juicy, sweet, tart, and crisp. The different characteristics are all part of the essential nature of an apple. In the same way, Paul gave a number of terms to describe the result of the Holy Spirit in a human life. *Goodness* is one of these. The fruit of the Spirit is not the manifestation of our human nature. It is not produced by the human

spirit. The human spirit is a part of what Paul calls the flesh. The fruit of the Spirit begins to come about as a result of a divine transformation of a person. We become something that we were not before, and the Holy Spirit begins to produce something different in our lives that we could never produce before. Goodness is one of those things.

### *A Change of Nature*

In describing this transformation, Paul sounds like he may have just returned from a retreat with the beloved disciple John who was so fond of speaking in terms of light and darkness. Paul wrote to the Ephesians: "For once you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true)" (5:8-9). When we become children of God, we are changed by His Spirit which is at work in us. God is making His children good. When His Holy Spirit enters the life of a believer, the person begins to take on the character of that new life because goodness is a unique characteristic of God,

When people become believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, God changes them into a new kind of life form! The change is not just a change in legal status—that one's guilt is forgiven. Jesus said a believer would be born from above by the Holy Spirit (John 3:6-7). Faith does not give a person a fresh start as a human but a fresh start as an immortal child of God because "if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come" (2 Cor. 5:17). When this change comes about, God begins to transform the human character until it conforms to His own (2 Cor. 3:18). The Book of Acts describes Barnabas as "a good man, full of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 11:24). Goodness came as a result of the fullness of the Spirit in his life.

Goodness does not come forth in a life as a result of knowing a theoretical, philosophical system. Goodness does not come about by knowing a code of ethics or a statement of laws. It does not come about by doing what we deem to be good deeds. Goodness only comes about by knowing God and letting Him have His way with us.

Goodness is a matter of becoming like Jesus. It happens naturally for those who set their minds and their hearts on Christ. The only possible way for Christians not to be filled with goodness is to set their minds on the passions and desires of the flesh rather than on Christ.

The rich, young man who came to Jesus had his bag full of passions and desires. He had his mind full of presuppositions and judgments about God. The saddest moment in his life came when Jesus gave him a straight answer. Everything he thought that he knew about goodness was wrong. Not only that, but he had to decide between his own passions and what God wanted for him. So Jesus made him an offer, If you want to go to heaven and be perfect, go on, get rid of all that junk, and come along with Me; I'm going to heaven soon.