

## CHAPTER IV

# THE GOODNESS OF GOD

### A. THE GOODNESS OF GOD DEFINED

#### 1. Goodness by definition.

- a. Try to define “goodness” apart from the character of God. Of course a moral quality will most likely be a consideration. Though there will probably be some difficulty here if we more loosely refer to mere sentimentality, experience and subjective feeling. Consider the following common ideas.
  - (1) Goodness is the opposite of badness. However, a negative concept does not define a positive concept, though it does help to isolate it. Of course we could immediately ask, “What is badness?” Certainly this makes more clear that we are considering a matter of ethics and morality.
  - (2) Both Plato and Aristotle considered goodness to be, “the highest end to which knowledge and action lead us.”<sup>1</sup> However an objective moral quality seems missing here. With regard to the German philosopher Nietzsche, to be good is “to be brave,” it is “all that increases the feeling of power, the will to power, power itself, in man.”<sup>2</sup> There is no moral element here, only the upholding of raw human potency. So would this definition establish the “highest end,” in the realm of sophisticated, high tech larceny, to be good?
  - (3) “Good” may be associated with pleasure, human happiness, or as one philosopher expresses it, that which is “maximally conducive to human happiness.”<sup>3</sup> Here the experiential tends to rise above the moral. But would this make the professed bliss of the hedonist or sadist “good”?
- b. According to the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, the primary definition of “good” is, “having the right or desired qualities, satisfactory, adequate” which suggests a vital moral quality. However “the right” here recalls the earlier study of

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<sup>1</sup> Everett F. Harrison, ed., *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, p. 253.

<sup>2</sup> Will Durant, *Outlines of Philosophy*, p. 368.

<sup>3</sup> William H. Halverson, *A Concise Introduction to Philosophy*, p. 234.

“righteousness.” So how do “the good” and “the right” or “righteousness” differ? There seems to be a close connection.

2. Goodness by comparison with holiness.
  - a. Recall the two major aspects of God’s overall moral being, His holiness. Negative holiness is that which God is wholly set apart from, that is moral impurity or unrighteousness. Positive holiness is that which God is set apart to, that is absolute moral purity intrinsic to himself, or righteousness. Hence righteousness is at the very heart of God’s moral being.
  - b. What then is the difference between God’s righteousness and His goodness, and particularly according to biblical definition.
    - (1) In the Old Testament God’s righteousness is the totality of His moral being in an absolute, positive and essential sense. So God’s goodness, **טוֹב**, *tōb*, is that which is observed in God’s moral being and works with *admiration, pleasant moral appreciation*, especially by man (Ps. 104:24-28; 119:68; Jer. 31:10-14). However, “God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good” (Gen. 1:31). The goodness of God is His moral attractiveness which is both satisfying, pleasing, and praiseworthy. “Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good; for His lovingkindness is everlasting” (Ps. 118:29; cf. 65:4). In the New Testament, the goodness of God is described by *ἀγαθός*, *agathos*, meaning essentially good, that is morally dependable, honorable (Mark 10:17-18), and thus morally beneficial and appealing.
    - (2) God’s goodness is His admirable being and doing, but especially His attractive moral excellence, which when expressed actively is defined as His love. God is good, worthy of admiration, and when He morally demonstrates His goodness; that is He loves. “Goodness is the generic attribute of which the love of benevolence, grace, pity, mercy, forgiveness, are but specific actings, distinguished by the attitude of their objects, rather than by the intrinsic principle.”<sup>4</sup>
    - (3) Stephen Charnock comments: “Goodness is the brightness and loveliness of our majestic Creator.” In an active sense it is God’s “inclination to deal well and bountifully with His creatures.”<sup>5</sup> Hence God is morally attractive in both His being and doing. This appeal is experienced by the child of God when his heart, having been renewed, is capable of delighting in righteousness.

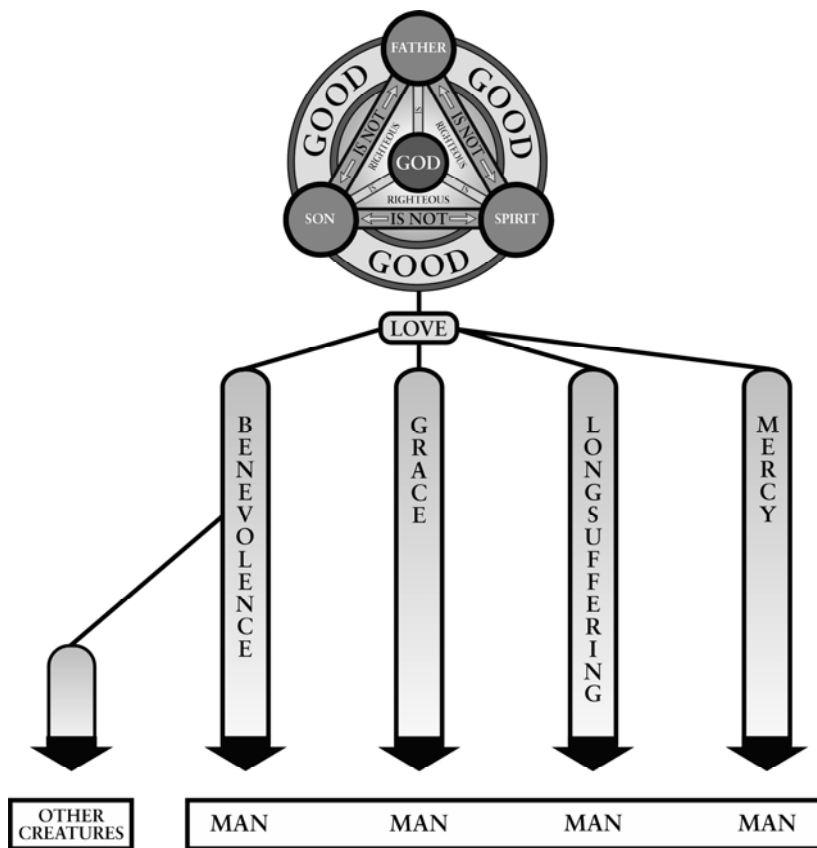
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<sup>4</sup> Robert L. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, p. 169.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Charnock, *Works*, II, pp. 281, 283-4.

3. Goodness by comparison with love.
- God's goodness refers to that *observed*, attractive moral excellence, that *appreciation* of His righteousness which the spiritual man especially delights to acknowledge.
  - God's love refers to His *active* goodness. When God communicates His goodness to His creation and man in particular, He expresses love. By its very nature, love has a transitive, active quality, that is it must be directed towards an object. This communicated goodness of God has four distinct aspects which are diagramed below.<sup>6</sup> So the Triune God is holy in nature, and the admiration of His righteousness, as even contrasted with the unholy heavens (Job 15:15), results in the creature declaring that God is good. When God expresses His goodness, there is the active manifestation of His love as benevolence, grace, longsuffering, and mercy.

## THE GOODNESS OF GOD COMMUNICATED TO HIS CREATURES



<sup>6</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 70-73. Also refer to Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, I, pp. 427-9; William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, I, pp. 385-92.

- (1) Love as benevolence, or God's *welfare* to all His creatures and man in particular. "44 But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous." (Matt. 5:44-45, cf. Luke 6:27-36; Acts 14:15-17).
  - (2) Love as grace, or God's *depth* of love directed towards man as an unholy sinner and law-breaker. "I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor. Yet I was shown mercy because I acted ignorantly in unbelief; 14and the grace of our Lord was more than abundant, with the faith and love which are found in Christ Jesus. 15It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all." (I Tim. 1:13-15; cf. Rom. 3:24; 5:1-2, 6-8; II Cor. 8:9).
  - (3) Love as longsuffering, or God's *patient breadth* of love. "Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?" (Rom. 2:4; cf. 3:25; I Pet. 3:20). "And regard the patience of our Lord as salvation; just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you." (II Pet. 3:15, cf. v. 9).
  - (4) Love as mercy, or God's *relieving* love to man in distress and agony. "3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, 4 who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God." (Cor. 1:3-4; cf. Ps. 86:14-15).
- c. By way of illustration, John Hampden Gurney well describes God's *observed* and *active* goodness as follows:

Yes, God is good—in earth and sky,  
 From ocean depths and spreading wood,  
 Ten thousand voices seem to cry:  
 God made us all, and God is good.

The sun that keeps his trackless way  
 And downward pours his golden flood,  
 Night's sparkling hosts, all seem to say,  
 In accents clear, that God is good.

Yes, God is good, all nature says,  
 By God's own hand with speech endued;  
 And man, in louder notes of praise,  
 Should sing for joy that God is good.  
 For all Thy gifts we bless Thee, Lord,  
 But chiefly for our heavenly food;  
 Thy pardoning grace, Thy quickening word,  
 These prompt our song, that God is good.

## B. THE GOODNESS OF GOD ACCORDING TO JESUS CHRIST - MARK 10:17-18.

A man enthusiastically addressed Jesus Christ as follows, "Good teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" To this he was given the reply, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone."

### 1. "Goodness" as defined by a natural man, v. 17.

Clearly this man used the term "good" in a loose though respectful manner in applying it to Christ. It was more a patronizing approach, an offer of social respect rather than a deep reverential enquiry. Most likely he had heard Jesus before and been impressed. However this man needs to be jolted into thinking about what he had too familiarly spoken about. Many a person today speaks of Jesus Christ without really thinking about what they have said. Jesus often called men to account concerning loose declarations (Matt. 5:33-37; 23:16-22).

### 2. "Goodness" as defined by Jesus Christ, v. 18.

In responding, "Why do you call me good?" it is as if Jesus was saying, "My friend, do you really understand what you are talking about?" Though He does not say, "No one is good except the *Father*." Only then would he have excluded himself as being good. Of course if Jesus is essentially God, as this man fails to perceive, then he ought to be rightly be addressed as "good," but only when that perception is genuine and rightly understood. Rather Jesus wants this man to carefully consider who he really is. But what exactly is this "goodness of God" here? In a sermon on Mark 10:17, Thomas Manton makes a fourfold distinction concerning God the Father being declared by the Son of God as "good."<sup>7</sup>

- a. God is *originally* good. His goodness originates from Himself and no other source, so goodness for man comes from no other source. "Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas Manton, *The Complete Works of Thomas Manton*, XVI, pp. 428-9.

lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow." (Jas. 1:17). If God had His goodness from another, then He would not originate all things.

- b. God is *essentially* good. He is not only good, but goodness itself. The goodness of God and the goodness of the creature differ, as a thing whose substance is gold differs from that which is gilded and overlaid with gold. With a vessel of pure gold, the matter itself gives luster to it; but in a gilded vessel, the outward luster is one thing, and the substance is another.
- c. God is *infinitely* good. While a creature's goodness is limited according to what has been given to it, there is no limit to the goodness of God. God is an ocean without banks or bottom; the goodness of the creature is but a drop from the ocean. God loves Himself as much as He can be loved. He is so infinitely good that He cannot do better. "There is no one holy like the Lord." (I Sam. 2:2).
- d. God is *immutably* good. His goodness cannot be diminished or augmented. God has all possible perfection. There cannot be any addition made to it or subtraction from it. Our state is full of changes, as the sea has its ebbings and flowings. God is pure, but we are purified. We were once defiled, but God's goodness ever is and ever was in the same fullness.

### C. THE GOODNESS OF GOD TO THE BELIEVER - ISAIAH 63:7-9

#### 1. Introduction to Isaiah 63.

- a. In Isaiah 40-66, the second major division of this evangelical prophecy, we have the Suffering Servant, the Messiah Prince and his kingdom program introduced. Here is the Messiah Prince and his two comings (61:1-3; cf. Luke 4:16-21). The kingdom program is established and centered in Jerusalem where Israel displays her glory (62:1-4).
- b. Christ's wrath is displayed at Armageddon against a rebellious world (63:1-6, cf. Rev. 19:13 re his dress of blood). But now a stark contrast is made between God's regard for the world, v. 6a, and His own people. v. 1b. We are now suddenly transported from a vision of God's wrath and justice to that of His goodness and love poured out upon the house of Israel.

#### 2. Isaiah rejoices at the goodness and love of God toward Israel (Isaiah 63:7-9).

In this passage we find the four categories of the love of God expressed toward Israel.

<sup>7</sup> I shall make mention of the lovingkindnesses of the LORD, the praises of the LORD, according to all that the LORD has granted us, and the great goodness toward the

house of Israel, which He has granted them according to His compassion and according to the abundance of His lovingkindnesses. <sup>8</sup> For He said, "Surely, they are My people, sons who will not deal falsely." So He became their Savior. <sup>9</sup> In all their affliction He was afflicted, and the angel of His presence saved them; in His love and in His mercy He redeemed them, and He lifted them and carried them all the days of old.

- a. Love as *benevolence*; "according to all that the Lord has bestowed on us. . . . he bore them, and carried them all the days of old," vs. 7, 9. This divine welfare, this unfading provision from God's generous hand, included springs in the desert, shoes that did not wear out, manna from heaven, and eventually a land flowing with milk and honey.
- b. Love as *grace*; "I shall make mention of the lovingkindnesses of the Lord, . . . according to the multitude of His lovingkindnesses," v. 7. The word for "lovingkindness," רַחֲמֵי, *chesed*, here means God's loyal, steadfast, covenant, undeserved love to the sinner. Here is the integrity of God's love, as revealed to David (II Sam. 12:13). Consider God's grace in Isaiah 49:14-16; 54:8, 10.
- c. Love as *longsuffering*; "he bore them, and carried them all the days of old," v. 9. Longsuffering is God's patient love, His forbearance, just as a mother carries her child through the years of early life. "In the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed" (Rom. 3:26). Again, God "overlooked the times of ignorance" (Acts 17:30; cf. Neh. 9:28-31).
- d. Love as *mercy*. "In all their afflictions he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence [face] saved them" v. 9. Mercy is God's relieving love, that rescues man from distress and despair. "You have seen my affliction; You have known the troubles of my soul, and You have not given me over into the hand of the enemy; You have set my feet in a large place" (Psalm 31:7-8; cf. Ezra 9:9).

#### D. THE GOODNESS OF GOD IN THE BELIEVER - II THESSALONIANS 1:11-12

##### 1. Introduction to II Thessalonians 1.

- a. Some Thessalonian believers are convinced that "the Great Tribulation" or the apocalyptic "day of the Lord" is upon them, 2:1-2.
- b. However, Paul; teaches that this terrible "day of the Lord" is yet future (I Thess. 5:2-3; II Thess. 1:6-10).

- (1) Unbelievers will be judged by the Christ they rejected, and removed from his glorious presence, 1:7-9.
- (2) Believers will enjoy holy and blissful fellowship with Christ, being instruments for his glory and admirers of his glory, 1:10.

2. Paul's prayer is for the manifestation of God's goodness, II Thessalonians 1:11-12.

"<sup>11</sup> To this end also we pray for you always, that our God will count you worthy of your calling, and fulfill every desire for goodness and the work of faith with power, <sup>12</sup> so that the name of our Lord Jesus will be glorified in you, and you in Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ." While anticipating the day of Christ's return in glory, v. 10, the Apostle repeatedly prays for the Thessalonians' present manifestation of goodness and faith, v. 11.

a. He desires that they "fulfill every desire for goodness, ἀγαθωσύνη, agathōsunē, and the work of faith with power," v. 11, that the regenerate disposition for goodness be fruitful. In other words, it is expected that believers desire goodness, that is God's quality of goodness, and also reflect it. Here is a fundamental affection of the Christian.

- (1) This reflected or manifest goodness will signify that they are "worthy of their calling" (I Thess. 2:12), v. 11; it will legitimize their calling; it will confirm the validity of their spiritual vocation; it will vindicate the profession of Christian conversion.
- (2) This evident goodness will be generated through the "work of faith with/in [the] power [of the Holy Spirit]." Such a dynamic will distinguish this goodness from social do-goodism. The attractiveness of this goodness will be its spiritual quality, as distinct from formal religiosity.
- (3) This recognized goodness will bring glory to the Lord Jesus Christ, v. 12. As objects of God's goodness, He intends that believers reflect a quality of goodness, mediated through Jesus Christ, resulting in reciprocal glorification (Acts 17:17, 19, 22).

3. Paul's prayer is for the communication of God's goodness.

The communicable nature of this attribute of God's goodness is plainly evident. An interest in goodness is an expectation of conversion. When God is good to the creature through the saving work of the gospel, there should be an inevitable thirst for personal goodness in response, and a consequent manifestation and reflection of

it. Otherwise there is no reason to believe that a work of grace has been done in the heart by the God who is good.

- a. Specifically, since God's goodness is communicated as love and distinguished as benevolence, grace, longsuffering, and mercy, we are to admire, desire, and manifest these facets of God's love.
- b. But note that Paul describes these characteristics as coming "with power," v. 11, that is they are supernaturally endowed, not naturally developed, yet cultivated, and thus distinctively glorify our Father who is in heaven
- c. Thus the goodness of God is derived from a living union with God since we have "become partakers/sharers [κοινωνός, koinōnos] of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust" (II Pet. 1:4).
  - (1) In Galatians 5:22, the fruit of goodness is derived from the indwelling Spirit of God. Further, "and concerning you, my brethren, I myself also am convinced that you yourselves are full of goodness [through the Holy Spirit], filled with all knowledge and able also to admonish one another." (Romans 15: 14). This goodness is morally attractive.
  - (2) In Ephesians 5:8-9, the reflected light of goodness in the believer is evident in a good Christian walk. "8 For you were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord; walk as children of Light 9 (for the fruit of the Light consists in all goodness and righteousness and truth)." This goodness is morally attractive.
  - (3) In II Peter 1:3, "Seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true/mature knowledge [ἐπίγνωσις, epignōsis] of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence." This divine bestowal of godliness must include the moral attraction of goodness.

Good Thou art, and good Thou dost,  
Thy mercies reach to all,  
Chiefly those who on Thee trust,  
And for Thy mercy call;  
New they every morning are;  
As fathers when their children cry,  
Us Thou dost in pity spare,  
And all our wants supply.

Mercy o'er Thy works presides;  
Thy providence displayed  
Still preserves, and still provides  
For all Thy hands have made;  
Keeps, with most distinguished care,  
The man who on Thy love depends;  
Watches every numbered hair,  
And all his steps attends.

Who can sound the depths unknown  
Of Thy redeeming grace?  
Grace that gave Thine only Son  
To save a ruined race!  
Millions of transgressors poor  
Thou hast for Jesus' sake forgiven,  
Made them of Thy favor sure,  
And snatched from hell to Heaven.

Millions more Thou ready art  
To save, and to forgive;  
Every soul and every heart  
Of man Thou wouldst receive:  
Father, now accept of mine,  
Which now, through Christ, I offer Thee;  
Tell me now, in love divine,  
That Thou hast pardoned me!

*Charles Wesley*