

CHAPTER V

THE BENEVOLENCE OF GOD

A. INTRODUCTION

1. Have you ever been blessed in your business employment or profession or family life, and thus drawn comfort from Psalm 5:12, “[I]t is You who blesses the righteous man, O LORD, You surround him with favor as with a shield.” But then you notice that your unbelieving neighbor has been similarly blessed in these same areas of life, perhaps even more than yourself. Indeed you may be like David’s musician, Asaph, who noticed that many of his godless acquaintances had been blessed beyond his acquisitions. He was troubled and envious when he saw “the prosperity of the wicked. For there are no pains in their death, and their body is fat. They are not in trouble as other men, nor are they plagued like mankind” (Psalm 73:3-5). Hence you wondered whether, in the circumstances, you were more worthy of greater heavenly generosity than your neighbor had received.
 - a. The problem here is that reward is being confused with benevolence, or special grace is being confused with common grace. There is particular grace that powerfully works toward and within God’s elect, and there is common grace that is showered upon all of mankind, both elect and non-elect. And, paradox though it may seem, God is not only angry with the workers of iniquity, but also He “is a righteous judge” who will “sharpen His sword” for righteous retribution (Ps. 7:11-17).
 - b. God does remunerate the righteous (Ps. 58:11), that is, “he who sows righteousness gets a true reward” (Prov. 11:18), primarily in spiritual, though secondarily also in material ways. However He is also benevolent and kind toward believer and unbeliever alike. This kindness is often a stumbling block in much the same way that the elder brother was “angry and was not willing” to joyously participate in the kindness of his father toward his prodigal son (Luke 15:25-30).
2. Benevolence is God’s non-discriminatory welfare lavished upon His creatures, both animal and human, even though none deserve this sustenance. It is kindly provision for the creature from the Creator. So “the LORD is good to all, and His mercies are over all His works. . . . You give them their food in due time. You open Your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing” (Psa. 145:9, 15-16).

- a. While God created the universe with high regard and affection, He also designated it as being “very good” (Gen. 1:31-2:3). Consequently He sustains the work of His hands with continuous care and devotion, even “the birds of the air” (Matt. 6:26). So He “upholds all things by the word of His power” (Heb. 1:3). Furthermore, such maintenance is unending, without respite (John 5:17;). Thus God invests close loving scrutiny and enriching influence in His creation.
- b. God’s maintenance of His creation is referred to as His providence, His provision or benevolence or goodwill, that is also generous. It is righteous providence, administered through His sovereignty, that employs omniscience which makes Him to be aware of needs throughout the universe. So God is “glad in His works” (Ps. 104:31). Hence this loving concern includes fondness for the inanimate, animate as well as the human works of His own hands.

B. GOD’S BENEVOLENCE TOWARD HIS CREATURES

1. The animal world.

God “prepares for the raven its nourishment.” (Job 38:41). He preserves “man and beast” (Ps. 36:6). “He sends forth springs in the valleys; they flow between the mountains; they give drink to every beast of the field; the wild donkeys quench their thirst. . . . The trees of the LORD drink their fill. . . . The young lions roar after their prey and seek their food from God. . . . They all wait for You to give them their food in due season. You give to them, they gather it up; You open Your hand, they are satisfied with good” (Ps. 104:10-11, 16, 21, 27-28).

- a. God is not averse to His own handiwork, nor does He neglect or act indifferently toward it. Rather His “open handedness” reflects a widespread generosity. “You open Your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing” (Psa. 145:16; cf. 104:28). This divine, plentiful bounty, when combined with God’s forbearance and covenant faithfulness, indicates, not spasmodic but dependable divine care.
- b. Notice how God seems to experience great delight when He observes His frolicking, stampeding, raging masterpieces. “The ostriches’ wings flap joyously with the pinion and plumage of love. . . . [Concerning the horse] his majestic snorting is terrible. He paws in the valley, and rejoices in his strength; . . . the hawk soars, stretching his wings toward the south. . . . [Concerning Behemoth] Behold now, his strength in his loins and his power in the muscles of his belly. He bends his tail like a cedar” (Job 39:13, 20-21, 26; 40:15-17). “I know every bird in the mountains, and everything that moves in the field is Mine. . . . There is the

sea, great and broad, in which are swarms without number, animals both small and great" (Ps. 50: 11; 104:25).

- c. While it is highly probable that before the Fall animals were vegetarian in their diet, yet presently, as penned by Tennyson, their nature being "red in tooth and claw," still God provides for them (Ps. 104:20-21). Therefore here is a compassionate model for suitable human treatment of the animal world. Nevertheless it certainly does not exclude the swatting of flies or culling of over-populated species. Not surprisingly then, this benevolence is also replicated in God's ceaseless showers of blessing that fall upon raging mankind (Matt. 6:45).

2. The human world.

Following the flood that Noah and his family escaped, God covenanted that, "while the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease" (Gen. 8:22). So Paul declared to his Athenian audience that the only true and living God, "did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness" Acts 14: 17). Of course this did not guarantee either the elimination of desert regions, occasional tsunamis, or the provision of more recent Western household amenities and universal health insurance!

- a. Man, having the *imago dei*, the image of God, self-consciousness involving intellect, will and emotions, moral consciousness, and appointed dominion, is more important to God than the animals. Jesus said, "Are you not worth much more than they [the birds of the air]?" (Matt. 6:25-26). Hence God's benevolence toward man is commensurate with this exalted personal relationship that He has established with man in which He speaks, even "face to face [with Moses] , just as a man speaks to his friend" (Ex. 20:22; 33:11). In that God originally provided a garden for Adam and Eve where He communed with them (Gen. 2:8-9; 3:8-9), we have an indication of His kind intent.
- b. By way of illustration, the benevolence of parents toward their children, being usually ever so generous, is greater than that bestowed by children on their brothers or sisters, or that provided for family pets. So God's benevolence to man is greater than man's benevolence to man or that provided for the animal world. In particular, God is concerned for the soul of man, and this provision reaches to spiritual dimensions. "Come and fear, all who fear God, and I will tell of what He has done for my soul" (Ps. 66:16).
- c. God's benevolence is nondiscriminatory, being dispensed to sinner and saint, young and old, of every race alike (Matt. 5:44-45; Luke 6:35). It is blanket welfare that is more corporate than particular, more inclusive than exclusive. On the

other hand man, who is so merit rather than grace oriented, will even be partial toward select animals. Then in the realm of racial categories within his own human kind, man is decidedly averse to nondiscriminatory benevolence. The reason he tends toward this discrimination is because of self-interest and a judgmental spirit.

- d. God's benevolence is given unconditionally, according to His covenant promise with regard to the guarantee, "While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night" (Gen. 8:22). This guarantee is applicable even to those who enjoy its benefits and yet refuse to acknowledge the generosity of its Provider (Acts 14:15-17). Thus God's benevolence is rooted in the loving quality of His character, the inviolate terms of His promise. However participants in this blessing are not guaranteed endless participation in such benevolence since it is also regulated by righteousness. The world at Noah's time encountered this truth, and even the generation that followed the flood (Gen. 18:22-19:26).

C. GOD'S BENEVOLENCE EVIDENT IN HIS HUMAN CREATURES

1. In contrast with God, the natural man is discriminatory in offering help to his fellow human brother. That is he is selectively malevolent and benevolent towards mankind in general.
 - a. He will hate and neglect those he considers to be unworthy, and regard with preferential treatment those he esteems to be worthy. Blanket kindness toward sinner and saint is not his natural desire. As Paul writes, "one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would even dare to die" (Rom. 5:7; cf. Gal. 5:19-20).
 - b. By way of illustration, giving presents at a birthday celebration or at Christmas time, we tend to give selectively and generously to our favorites, our closest friends or to those who give us good presents. But this is not so with God since He is "the Savior of all men" (I Tim. 4:10) which, in view of the following context with regard to, "especially of believers," means that "there is no one who does not in one way or another come within the reach of his benevolence."¹
2. Children of God, with the likeness of God, are to manifest the benevolence of God to the animal world. Man's responsible dominion toward them will be one of protection with the avoidance of abuse and unnecessary commercial exploitation. But further,

¹ William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: I & II Timothy and Titus*, p. 155-156. Concerning a variety of interpretations considered here, Hendriksen's careful study is by far the most satisfactory.

the Christian will appreciate the animal world, although a lower order, yet as beautiful, majestic, wonderfully sculptured beasts, some of which have been provided to make most loyal companions. Yes, some animals seem even ugly, dumb, and objectionable, as with the skunk, but God cares for them all and so should we. Nevertheless, surely Jesus trod on bugs and swatted flies; He certainly approved of the Jewish sacrificial system; we know he encouraged the catching of fish for personal consumption (Luke 5:5; 24:41-43).

- a. By way of illustration concerning an extreme outlook, Albert Schweitzer is well known for his “reverence for life” philosophy. In his *The Philosophy of Civilization* he states:

I too am subject to division of my will-to-live against itself. In a thousand ways my existence stands in conflict with that of others. The necessity to destroy and to injure life is imposed upon me. If I walk along an unfrequented path, my foot brings destruction and pain upon the tiny creatures which populate it. In order to preserve my own existence, I must defend myself against the existence which injures it. I become a persecutor of the little mouse which inhabits my house, a murderer of the insect which wants to have its nest there, a mass-murderer of the bacteria which may endanger my life. I get my food by destroying plants and animals. My happiness is built upon injury done to my fellow-men.²

Because of the practical outworking of Schweizer’s philosophy of life preservation at his medical mission in Lambarene, Africa, it was eventually concluded to have not been so successful.

- b. Nevertheless, it is to be expected that the Christian will treat the animal world with tender care. “You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing” (Deut. 25:4). “A righteous man has regard for the life of his animal” (Prov. 12:10). Even so, Jesus Christ was not a vegetarian (Luke 24:41-43).
- c. By way of application, a definite contrast should be made here between godless environmentalism, humanistic animal welfare movements, and the Christian benevolence that the Word of God exhorts concerning the world we live in. Humanistic or secular benevolence, which presupposes an evolutionary, materialistic world view, perceives such involvement as substantial kinship; this essential relationship is one of identical, material, soulless essence, even if man is considered to be more complex in structure. However, Christian benevolence, which presupposes a biblical world view, perceives man as having the *imago dei*, a personal and distinct soul relationship with God, and responsibility for fulfilling the mandate of lordly care for the created order (Genesis 1:27-30). Secular benevolence is accountable only to man and his self-serving ways and

² Albert Schweitzer, *The Philosophy of Civilization*, <http://www1.chapman.edu/schweitzer/sch.reading1.html> (accessed, December, 2007).

subjective morality; Christian benevolence is sourced only in the holy God of Abraham, and is accountable to Him concerning the good work of His hands.

3. Children of God, with the likeness of God, are to manifest the benevolence of God to the human world. There will be a wideness in our kindness, a lavishness in our tenderness, a liberality in our charity. As Frederick W. Faber has written:

There's a wideness in God's mercy,
Like the wideness of the sea;
There's a kindness in His justice,
Which is more than liberty.

For the love of God is broader
Than the measure of our mind;
And the heart of the Eternal
Is most wonderfully kind.

- a. Israel was to be motivated by God's redemption out of Egypt in providing for the poor and needy.
- (1) Benevolence was to be shown to the needy *Hebrew*. "If there is a poor man with you, one of your brothers, in any of your towns in your land which the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart, nor close your hand from your poor brother; but you shall freely open your hand to him, and shall generously lend him sufficient for his need in whatever he lacks. . . . You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God redeemed you; therefore I command you this day" (Deut. 15:7-8, 15). Such a generous attitude is to be motivated by the same "open handedness" that God manifests. "You open Your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing" (Ps. 145:16).
 - (2) Benevolence was to be shown to the needy *stranger* since Israel was once a stranger in Egypt. "[The LORD your God] executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and shows His love for the alien by giving him food and clothing. So show your love for the alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt" (Deut. 10:18-19). "When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, you shall not go over it again; it shall be for the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow. You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I command you to do this thing." (Deut. 24:19-22).
- b. The Church is to be likewise motivated by Jesus Christ's redemption from bondage to sin and darkness in providing for the poor and needy. "So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who are of the household of faith" (Gal. 6:10). "Be kind to one another, tender-

hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ has forgiven you. . . . [W]alk in love, just as Christ also loved you" (Eph. 4:32).

(1) Jesus Christ's teaching on benevolence (Matt. 5:43-45).

In the Sermon on the Mount, having quoted, "You shall love your neighbor" from Leviticus 19:18, Jesus adds the commonly understood, non-biblical Rabbinical tradition of, "and hate your enemy." Of course, in the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus expounds upon the true meaning of "neighbor" as being non-discriminatory compassion (Luke 10:25-37).

- (a) Benevolence according to the natural man, is discriminatory benevolence, v. 43. The religious child of this world, aroused in admiration of his self-righteousness, racial distinctiveness, and cultural advancement, becomes the judge of the worthy and the unworthy on his terms. There is a kinship here with social Darwinism whereby only those more socially fit will ultimately survive.
- (b) Benevolence according to the spiritual man, is nondiscriminatory benevolence, v. 44. The spiritual child of God, aroused to a profound awareness of his deep corruption, like Paul (I Tim. 1:15), becomes acutely sensitive to his own similar condition as if in fact he were the foremost sinner. Consequently, being convinced of his identity with a thoroughly corrupt human race, he finds it easy to be gracious to all.
- (c) Benevolence according to God the Father, is the pattern and measure of the true sons of God, v. 45. He asks us to show indiscriminate love, that which He compassionately, universally does himself. In conjunction with v. 44, it is obvious that there is a real sense in which God does love [ἀγαπάω, agapaō, here] the reprobate, even if the context concerns a "benevolent love" as distinct from particular, elective love.

(2) The Christian is to give priority to showing benevolence toward all believers since charity begins at home. "So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity." (Col. 3:12-14; cf. Gal. 6:10; I Tim. 3:4-5).

(3) The Christian is to show benevolence to "all men." This marks him out as a child of his Father (Matt. 6:45). Although the Old Testament spoke of inclusion of the Gentile nations by Messiah (Isaiah 9:1-2; 42:6; 49:6; 51:4;

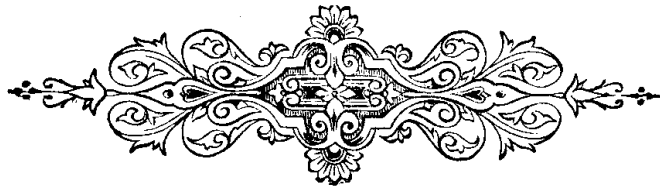
60:1-3.), during the time of Christ discriminatory Judaism regarded the Gentiles as “dogs” (Matt. 15:26). But those walking in Jesus’ steps follow His nondiscriminatory example (Matt. 15:27-28; cf. John 4:7-42; 12:20-33).

- (a) With *goodness*. “Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary. So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who are of the household of faith” (Gal. 6:9-10).
- (b) With *love*. “May the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all people, just as we also do for you; so that He may establish your hearts without blame in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints” (I Thess. 3:12-13).
- (c) With *patience*. “Live in peace with one another. We urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone” (I Thess. 5:13-14).
- (d) With *kindness*. “The Lord’s bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth” (II Tim. 2:24-25).
- (e) With *consideration*. “Be subject to rulers, to authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good deed, to malign no one, to be peaceable, gentle, showing every consideration for all men” (Tit. 3:1-2).
- (f) With *peace*. “Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord (Gal. 6:10).” (Heb. 12:14).
- (g) With *honor*. “Honor all people, love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king/emperor” (I Pet. 2:17).

c. By way of illustration, John Bunyan writes:

There is a state in us, I know not how it doth come about, when we are converted, to scornfully regard them that are left behind. Poor fools as we are, we forget that we ourselves were so. But would not it become us better, since we have tasted that the Lord is gracious, to carry it towards them so, that we may give them convincing ground to believe that we have found that mercy which also sets open the door for them to come and partake with us. . . . We ourselves live by grace; let us give as we receive, and labor to persuade our fellow sinners, which God has left

behind us, to follow after, that they may partake with us grace. We are saved by grace; let us live like them that are gracious. . . . Why not go to the poor man's house, and give him a penny, and a Scripture to think upon? Why not send for the poor to fetch away, at least, the fragments of thy table, that the bowels of thy fellow-sinner may be refreshed as well as thine?³



³ John Bunyan, *The Works of John Bunyan*, I, p. 98.

SALVATION, according to Jesus, is a matter of God's free grace; it is something which God gives to whom He will. The same great doctrine really runs all through the teaching of Jesus; it is the root of His opposition to the Scribes and Pharisees; it determines the confidence with which He taught His disciples to draw near to God. But it is the same doctrine, exactly, which appears in Paul. The Paul who combated the legalists in Galatia, like the Jesus who combated the Scribes and Pharisees, was contending for a God of grace

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