

The Goodness of God



Gary Wilkerson January 18, 2021

The Attribute that Blesses Us Wholly

God's goodness simply can't be nailed down. It transcends our understanding, yet it blesses us in every moment of our lives. His goodness can't be defined, yet we know its truth through scripture and the Spirit's witness. How can any human being ever get their head around the awesome goodness of God?

All of this raises a serious question: Is God's goodness really what we think it is? God has a lot of attributes that aren't very popular among Christians. In the Bible, we read of his judgment, anger, justice and wrath. The very mention of these seemingly "hard" traits in God causes a lot of people to tremble in fear. Yet if the Lord is good and these traits describe him, then we must also consider them to be good.

Why, then, do we close our eyes to such "hard" traits? Why isn't their effect to drive us nearer to the Lord, to worship him in full as "true worshipers (who) will worship the Father in spirit and truth" (*John 4:23, ESV*)? Aren't these traits part of God's goodness too?

The first thing to establish about God's goodness is that all his traits are wrapped up in one singular, supremely good being.

God's all-prevailing goodness is what assures us that, for instance, his justice is important. It's also how we know that his wrath is a good thing and not bad. In addition, his trait of holiness transcends us and is beyond our grasp, yet God unleashes it in our hearts to transform our lives.

Still, when pastors preach on these unpopular traits of God, some Christians think, "I'll be glad when this sermon series is over. I'm ready to hear something practical for my life." In truth, every aspect of God's character has practical implications for our lives, including the unpopular ones, because each one proceeds from his goodness.

A theological word may help here. It's called the simplicity of God, meaning essentially that God is one, that he isn't split into different things. He's not a little bit wrath and little bit mercy; he's not more judgment and less compassion. Every attribute of God is wrapped up in his goodness, and we can trust them all. In fact, if that weren't the case, we would be in serious trouble.

If God were only all-powerful, he would be like the Greek god Zeus, throwing lightning bolts at us whenever it suits his whims. An all-powerful God has to be an all-merciful God too. Married together, these traits make up what I call God's muscular goodness. It's muscular because it holds both ends of the spectrum in equal power. His goodness isn't soft on one end and hard on the other; it is powerful in all aspects. Let me illustrate.

At World Challenge, our leaders use a well-known missions book called *When Helping Hurts*. It talks about how merciful works can actually harm needy communities if those works aren't done with a justice-oriented goal in mind. You see, a gift of money or supplies only helps an impoverished community if it builds toward their dignity and self-sufficiency rather than feeding an ongoing dependency. Missions agencies have learned this the hard way

over decades. Compassion without a just end—justice for the recipients—lacks power. It looks merciful but ends up an empty gesture that feeds dependency rather than dignity.

The same is true for seemingly “hard” traits of God, such as his righteous judgment. We ought to rejoice that God wields righteous judgment; without it, evil’s destruction would run rampant. Without the just cause of the Allied forces to stand in the way of Nazi evil, many more lives would have been lost in the holocaust.

So the supposedly “softer” attributes of God don’t reveal weakness, nor do the “harder” traits reveal rigidity. All of God’s attributes are fully encompassed and fully expressed in one supremely good being.

Some church movements build entire doctrines around cherry-picked traits of God that ignore his other traits.

Much of the prosperity gospel stresses a kind of positive thinking that focuses only on receiving pleasant things in life. In those circles, all trials are seen as coming from Satan and are to be denied and rejected. The apostle Paul preached a very different view of trials. He testified to the church in Ephesus that the Holy Spirit would lead him directly into trials that would cause him great suffering. “Now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me” (*Acts 20:22-23*).

Paul knew that suffering is part of the Christian life. Indeed, it’s a significant part of taking up Christ’s cross. That’s why Paul said we must heed the *whole* counsel of God, not just the pleasant parts. “I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God” (*Acts 20:27*). Preaching the whole gospel gave Paul a clear conscience before God, and this increased his authority.

Some see God’s goodness embodied in his generous gift-giving. Often, though, God may express goodness by withholding seemingly good things from us, even when we seek them from him. Jesus describes God’s generosity when he says, “What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent...?” (*Luke 11:11*). Yet, what if we seek the Father for something that’s a counterfeit of his goodness? Should we expect God to give it to us? In that case, God’s withholding is just as merciful as his allowing. That’s the loving discipline of a caring, considerate father. While he protects us from the counterfeit, he also preserves for us what is *wholly* good.

The whole counsel of God is essential in another way. If we tend to avoid one aspect of his character, the whole counsel of God reveals that our witness is incomplete. For instance, if I speak of God’s grace but refuse to acknowledge his justice, I lose a great measure of authority.

The same can happen with rigid, hyper-holiness movements that deny human pleasure. When they preach a holy God who’s never pleased and only judges, one who invokes fear without compassionate love, the true witness of God’s compassionate love and mercy is lost.

Biblical figures from both Testaments recognized this. They were acquainted with the tender love of God, yet they fell on their faces in awe-filled terror when confronted with his holy presence. The righteous prophet Isaiah testified, “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!” (*Isaiah 6:5*). Something similar happened centuries later when the Father spoke from heaven at the Mount of Transfiguration. When he declared, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him,” all the disciples present “fell on their faces and were terrified” (*Matthew 17:5-6*). It’s a scene of trembling, yet it reflects God’s goodness too.

Only when God’s traits are seen as one—judging and forgiving, just and merciful, transcendent and immanent, holy and compassionate—do we present the whole gospel with full authority. God’s goodness is neither “soft” nor “hard”; it is profound, whole and powerful. Though it is beyond our ability to grasp fully, it works his good wholly and powerfully in us in practical ways.

How do we shift our lens of Bible reading from “How does this benefit me?” to “What does this tell me about the supremely good God?”

We have to ask the Holy Spirit to give us a new lens through which to read the scriptures. The Bible isn’t a how-to

book of blessings. It's a book about God who is wholly good, and its message about this is serious.

Think of the rich young ruler, a man who may have lived as perfect and good a life as any person could. Consider what happened when he approached Jesus. "A man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, '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 except God alone'" (*Mark 10:17-18*).

Of course, we know Jesus is good; he's one third of the Godhead! Evidently, though, this young man only knew Jesus as a teacher, not as divine. So, Christ addressed him accordingly, saying God alone is good. Jesus then proved this to be true. When he gave the ruler a loving challenge, the young man's lifelong goodness faltered.

"'You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.' Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions" (*10:21-22*).

Friend, if Jesus tells us there is only one good being in the entire universe, we'd better pay attention. Even then, that being's goodness toward us holds true despite knowing we will falter. "And Jesus, looking at him, loved him" (*10:21*).

This leads to my very final point about God's muscular goodness and the whole counsel of his Word. When we talk about repentance, most of us imagine heavy conviction from the Holy Spirit filling our hearts and causing us to ache. For many, repentance falls into the "hard" category of God's traits. Once again, Paul comes to the rescue, preaching, "God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance" (*Romans 2:4*). God desires for his traits of *kindness* and mercy to bring us to repentance before we experience things like his justice and holy wrath.

Our God is wholly good, and he can choose any way he wishes to lead us to repentance (which, after all, simply means turning around and going in the other direction). It's time to accept both his discipline and his love, for both are wrapped up in one supremely good God. That is good news indeed.

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