

Good

August 28, 2022 A.M.
West Side Church of Christ
Searcy, Arkansas
Nathan Guy

Scripture Reading

“Moses said, ‘Please show me your glory,’ And he said, ‘I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name ‘The Lord.’ And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.” (Exodus 33:18-19 ESV).

“Mercy and truth have met together. Grim justice and peace have kissed! Truth rises from the earth, and righteousness smiles down from heaven (TLB). Yes, the Lord will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase” (Psalm 85:10-12).

INTRODUCTION

It was Tozer who said “what comes into our mind when we think about God is the most important thing about us.” In fact, Tozer writes, if you can get someone to answer honestly what they see when they think of God, you “might predict with certainty the spiritual future of that man.”¹

Isn't that true? When the children of Israel were getting ready to meet God on the top of the Holy Mountain, they looked up and saw the cloud and the billow smoke, heard the thunder and saw the lightening, and they got a picture of God in their head, and they covered in fear and refused to go meet Him. And God said, “I want you to know my heart!” So, he sent his Son Jesus to show us the Father. And prostitutes and tax collectors, the lepers, the poor, the folks in the villages and in the countryside couldn't help but be attracted to Jesus. And in this, Jesus declares, “this is who God is!” How you see God tells me everything I need to know about how you will respond to God, and it makes all the difference in the world.²

¹ A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1961), p. 9.

² J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), p. 5: “Men say they believe in God, but they have no idea who it is they believe in or what difference believing in Him may make.”

Last week, I introduced this series with a claim: that God wants us to view him in all his loveliness, in all his totality, through a better lens than the ones we probably have. And I've borrowed a title from a great book on this subject by James Bryan Smith titled “The good and beautiful God.” But in that claim, right off the bat, I'm claiming that a healthy prism for seeing all of God's attributes is through the lens of his *goodness*.

THE “ONLY GOD” KIND OF GOOD

When I was an undergrad student, I visited a church where the speaker got up and said, “God is good!” The audience responded, “All the time.” Then the speaker said, “And all the time...” when the congregation replied, “God is good!”

And He is, isn't He? In the Psalms (Ps 118:1) and in Chronicles (1 Chron 16:34; 2 Chron 5:13), the Bible tells us to give thanks to the Lord for he is good! And the connecting word is “for”. “FOR His steadfast love endures forever!” Do you know why he is good? Because his faithful love, his mercy, his loving-kindness endures for ever and ever! As Eugene Peterson puts it in The Message: “He is good and his love never quits!”

We sing it. “God is so good, he's so good to me.” “For he is good, for he is good to me.”

Do you remember the worship scene in the Temple when the Ark of the covenant is brought in for the first time? It's in 2 Chronicles 5. All the people line up. The whole congregation of God's people. There are so many festivities, the text says they were slaughtering and sacrificing so many sheep and oxen they couldn't even be counted! And they wait with bated breath as the priests carry in the holy ark, in which were the two tablets of Moses that housed the commandments of God. And all the Levitical singers were wearing their best robes and behind them in the orchestra pit the orchestra had their instruments all tuned up, and when the conductor raised the baton, everyone joined in unison to the praise of God, singing “For He is good, FOR his steadfast love endures forever!” And the house (the Bible repeats itself), the house of the Lord, was filled with a cloud, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the house of God” (2 Chron 5:13-14 ESV).

We find the same theme in the mountain scene we visited last week. Exodus 34 is where God describes himself. Balanced? Yes—but leading with mercy and grace, forgiveness and love. But just one chapter earlier, Moses says to God “show me your glory!” (Ex

33:18). And God could have responded with the fire and smoke; but instead, God replied, “I will cause all my *goodness* to pass in front of you” (Ex 33:19).³

It’s a point made by Jesus Christ, no less. When the rich young ruler came to Jesus and called him “Good Teacher,” Jesus responded “why do you call *me* good? No one is good except God alone” (Mark 10:18).⁴ You wonder if God is good? If anything is good, God is. If goodness exists at all in the world, it’s a reflection of God. Goodness is just another name for God.⁵

GOODNESS IS WHERE JUSTICE & MERCY KISS

So, what is “goodness”? When we say, “God is good,” what do we mean by that? The problem with the word “goodness” in English is that the word can mean whatever you want it to mean. Think of all the ways we use the word “good.” Is a good horse one that runs really fast or one that will walk slowly? Well, it depends on whether we mean one in the wild doing what it was made to do or one in the stable doing what it was trained to do. A good knife is one that cuts well. But if it cuts me when I don’t want it

³ A point well made in Norman Bales, *How Do I Know I’m Saved?: A Study of God’s Grace* (Gospel Advocate, 1989), p. 19.

⁴ Oh, we could spend a lot of time in this text! We could look at it from multiple angles, told by multiple Gospel writers. Was he speaking cryptically? “You say I’m good. But only God is good. So you need to do the math and see I’m really God.” Maybe. “You call me good, then ask “what must I do” (or as Matthew’s version puts it, “what good thing must I do”) to have eternal life. As if being good and getting eternal life is someone a cause and effect relationship! You got that wrong. You can’t earn eternal life by doing; eternal life is not an achievement to be earned, it’s a gift to be received.”⁴ That’s important, too. There lots of ways to go with this text, but I just want to focus on this simple affirmation: Jesus said God...is...good! In a way like no other. So much so, that when we speak of goodness, and we speak of God, we end up with “only God is good.”

⁵ Does that mean we can’t use the word “good” for anything else? On the contrary. It means we can use the word good for everything that reflects Divine glory, but only *because* it reflects Divine glory. God makes the world, and because it’s *his* work, his heavens that declare the glory of God, his firmament that shows *his* handiwork, God saw that it was “good” (Gen 1:31). He says it 3 times in that chapter. The law—the law that came from the mouth of God and that reveals my weak character in contrast with God’s perfect character, Paul calls it “holy, and righteous and...good” (Rom 7:12, & 16). We speak of “good” men and women with “good” hearts and that’s perfectly legitimate, because even our Lord speaks this way, saying God causes the sun to rise on the evil and on the good (Matt 5:45). Jesus even says, “the good person out of his good treasure brings forth good” (Matt 12:35). So what are we to make of this “only” business? Well, it speaks to our humility in the presence of Almighty God. Paul says “I know that nothing good dwells in me, *that is, in my flesh*” (Rom 7:18). Goodness is not a human characteristic. It is a fruit of the Spirit. The flesh chases after what is ugly, since it is sold under sin to the “evil” one. But the Spirit causes us to reflect the glory of God.

to, I say “bad knife!” So, think of this word “good.” Do we mean God is a silly, ignorant people-pleaser who only gives you what you want rather than what you need? Of course not. Ask any parent, and they will tell you: giving your children what they want rather than what they need is not good. Does it mean he will never hurt us? I love this line from C. S. Lewis. Someone said, “If God is all good, then that rules out any possibility that what he gives us will hurt.” And Lewis replied, “then I guess you’ve never been to the dentist!”

It has to mean something, and it has to mean something bigger and more comprehensive than what we want in our little worlds on any particular occasion. So, let’s let the Bible give us a weighty definition. Try this on for size: *goodness is where justice and mercy meet.*

Do you remember that passage in Micah 6:8? “He has shown you, O man, what is good.” And what is good? “To do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly (or wisely) with your God.” Jesus echoes this in the New Testament when he chides the Pharisees for focusing all their energy on minute details, seeing only a ceremonial God who sets rules, rather than a living God who wants change in the hearts of his hearers and goodness to fill the earth. So, He says there are “weightier matters of the law.” Do you remember the three things he lists there? Justice, and mercy, and faithfulness (Matt 23:23).

Justice is a constant theme in the Scriptures. God has a special place in his heart for the poor. For the despised. For his first-class creation that gets treated like their second-class. And he promises he will defend the fatherless, he will visit the widows, he will protect the abused and mistreated, and he will come to the aid of the poor. His is an upside-down kingdom. Let those who are rich, weep now, if they are hoarding their riches while their neighbors suffer. Let those who are well-fed cry now, if they are enjoying seconds while their neighbors starve. How Long, O Lord, faithful and true, cried the souls of the martyrs, until you avenge our blood? “How long?” writes Martin Luther King, “not long. For the arch of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”⁶

Oh yes. God has a side. You better believe it; God has a side. And Justice will be done. That’s where we find all the warnings and pronouncements of doom.

And believe it or not—that’s good news. It’s easy to sing “God is so good” when you are sitting on a log near a campfire. But what about in the warp and woof of city life, in

⁶ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution,” Speech given at the National Cathedral (March 31, 1968).

the slumlord owning housing projects, midst the screaming sirens, drug dealing, and car bombings? There is badness in the world; and because God is good, He wants it to stop. And if it doesn't stop, He will make it stop. There are paradigms out there where God only thinks pleasant thoughts about what's happening in the world. All kindness, and no severity.

No severity when it comes to providing an end to tragedies??? Tell that to the husband who is watching his wife waste away from a brain tumor. Tell that to the mother whose son runs in front of a car, and now she can't go to bed without replaying the sound of screeching tires.

No severity when it comes to providing an end to unjust actors??? Tell that to the men of Ukraine, separated from their wives and children who are scattered all over the earth, while they deal with aggression and power. What you are left with is a God that is absolutely useless and ridiculous in those circumstances.

Miroslav Volf—learn that name—is a Christian ethicist who grew up in the Balkans. He's also a pacifist. How can someone who knows their Bible, and who has seen first-hand, the worst kind of violence of genocide (no less) against innocent women and children, take a position of non-retaliation? He explains it:

If God were not angry at injustice and deception and did not make a final end to violence—that God would not be worthy of worship...The only means of prohibiting all recourse to violence by ourselves is to insist that violence is legitimate only when it comes from God...My thesis that the practice of non-violence requires a belief in divine vengeance will be unpopular with many...in the West...[But] it takes the quiet of a suburban home for the birth of the thesis that human non-violence [results in the belief in] God's refusal to judge. In a sun-scorched land, soaked in the blood of the innocent, it will invariably die...[with] other pleasant captivities of the liberal mind.⁷

Oh, the doom language is very real. Justice is God's work. And justice is coming. We believe in a God of justice. But if you read it carefully, you'll find that the doom language is not directed at you—the 'to-the-Spirit-sowing, gospel-believing, Christ-following, God-honoring, poor-defending, widow-visiting, child-loving, Spirit-walking you'—even in your imperfection. No. He speaks over your shoulder to *them*, as he speaks of mercy to *you*. You see it in 2 Thessalonians 1. Look carefully at the language.

⁷ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*. Quoted here: <https://www.dashhouse.com/2008214more-volf-on-non-retaliation-and-gods-justice-html/>

Those persecutions and afflictions you are experiencing, Paul writes to the struggling church, this is evidence of the righteous judgment of God. You see, he considers it *just* to repay with affliction those who afflict you—when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on *those* who do not know God and on *those* who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. Oh yes. *They* will suffer punishment of eternal destruction, say Paul, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.

Do you hear the word choice there? “They.” “Those.” These phrase “those who don’t know God” and “those who don’t obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus” are stand in phrases for those who are standing on the outside and doing the afflicting, those who do not want the joy of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, those who wish only to sow to the wind and they will reap the whirlwind. If you have been the victim of a child-abuser, a husband-stealer, a slave-trader, a slum lord, you name it—if you, the children of God who refuse to fight back or give in return but suffer at the hands of wicked and vile people who are only out for themselves, rest assured, justice is coming. That’s the message of hope for you.

And hear that “they” language in contrast with the “you” and “us” language sprinkled in-between. God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant relief to you who are afflicted—or, as the King James puts it—*affliction for them* but **rest for us**—when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels. Yes, they will suffer punishment with eternal separation from God’s glory, but “He will come on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have come to believe, because our testimony to you was believed. To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.” And he quickly adds (chapter 2 verse 1) that he wants to talk more about “the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ and *our* being gathered together to him.” (2 Thess 1:4-12).

Did you catch that? “they,” “those,” and “them” language vs. “you” and “us” and “our” language. Affliction, destruction, separation for them. But for you—rest, glory, goodness, power, and grace. God has a side. And you have chosen His side.

So for you—please know—he fights for you. That language of rest for you comes right out of the pages of Deuteronomy, with the defeat of King Og in chapter 3. It’s I, the Lord, who has given you this land to possess, says God; your wives, your little ones, and even your livestock (I know you have much livestock) shall all remain in the cities

I have given you, until the Lord gives rest to your brothers, as to you, and they also will occupy the land the Lord your God gives them beyond the Jordan. Then each of you may return to his possession which I have given you.” God gives you the land. And God gives you rest. So he concludes with this line: “I commanded Joshua at that time, your eyes have seen all that the Lord your God has done to these two kings. So will the Lord do to all the kingdom into which you are crossing. You shall not fear them, for it is the Lord your God who fights for you” (Deuteronomy 3:18-22).

In his justice we see the goodness of God. We who stand for and fight for just causes. We who plead the case for the needy, the less-privileged, the outcast, the despised and rejected—you know, the people who look like our Savior—we know that our cause is just. Because it’s God fighting those battles. And any who are under the foot, under the thumb, under the oppression of those whose actions show they don’t know God and they don’t believe in the gospel of a kingdom with Christ as king and outcasts invited to dine at the head table, they will find themselves thrown out so that you—you—the weary, the worn, those on the side of the just—may find peace, and hope, and rest.

And here is where the upside kingdom comes full circle. Justice for you ends in mercy for you. But wait for this: God is also willing, in Christ, to bear the full penalty of justice so that mercy may fall far beyond any line we can imagine.

There is something comforting in the line “we get what we deserve.” When we see great evil in the world we want to shout with the Psalmist and the prophets: “you will get what’s coming to you!” But then we take a good, hard look in the mirror.⁸

If we get what we deserve...what *hope* do we have? When Jesus and his disciples passed by a man blind from birth, the apostles asked “who sinned? This man or his parents?” They reasoned this way: God gives us what we deserve. This man has a problem, it must be God’s punishment for his problem. Or he’s bearing the penalty for his parent’s

⁸ Hannah Arendt (who would later become a world-renown philosopher) was a news reporter during the Nazi war crimes tribunal, and she went to document the trial of Adolf Eichmann (what was termed “the trial of the century”). She went there expecting to witness horrendous evil. I mean, this guy presided over the transportation of hundreds, and thousands, of men, women, and children, loading up the boxcars and sending them off to their death. But what Arendt witnessed shocked her. She said what she saw was a gentile old man whose basic job was to make sure trains ran on time. She wrote about this and called it “the banality of evil.” It reminds us that little deeds can do a great deal of damage; little changes can lead us from a simple mistake to horrendous disaster. And if we see that we have a little evil sprinkled within us, what about what we don’t see? What about the consequences of our actions we don’t even know about? And to say “we have a little evil sprinkled within us” is an understatement, said for effect. Paul says “what a wretched man that I am! Who shall rescue me from this body of death?”

sins (remember that “unto the third and fourth generation” line in Exodus?). And Jesus shocked them all. “Neither one” says Jesus. It doesn’t work that way. That’s not the case. But it is the case that regardless of where you find yourself, the work of God can be seen in God’s desire and ability to bring cleansing and healing. Just watch, says Jesus; his mercy can be and is on display.

Justice for the wrong doer. Yes. I see that in Scripture. Mercy and rest for those who sit at the table of the Lord. I see that too. But who does he *want* at the table? Are you ready for this? Every one. “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise,” writes Peter, “as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). Even the oppressor? If he will cease from his oppressing—yes. Even if the abuser? If he will repent and call upon the God who can redeem the unredeemable—yes. Never forget, Jesus offered the supper of the Lamb to *Judas*. And He offered mercy to Nineveh. We forget, don’t we—we focus so much on being punished for our sins that we forget how we are punished *by* our sins. Sin distorts and perverts us. It makes monsters out of us. We see the effects of sin on the oppressed but forget that it turns that image-bearer-of-God into an oppressor as well. Norman Bales put it this way:

We so despise the sin corrupting the world...that we may forget how God sees the people who have been victimized by sin. He sees them through loving eyes and longs to forgive them. His outrage is directed toward the sin that has shattered their personhood, not toward the people themselves.⁹

When Peter sincerely but demonically tried to prevent Jesus from going to the cross, Jesus didn’t say “Peter you are demonic!” He said “Peter, Satan desires to sift you like wheat. But I have prayed for you, and when you are converted, strengthen your brothers.” You are more than your sin. And God longs to see you—every one of you—freed from sin.

Oh, there are some remarkably beautiful passages in Scripture, are there not? Here is one in Psalm 85:10: “mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other.” Different translations use different wording: love and loyalty; goodness and peace (CEV). Steadfast love and faithfulness (ESV); justice and peace (TLB). You see how what is rightly demanded and what is graciously offered are side-by-side. And wouldn’t you know it. Just two verses later, you know what word the Psalmist uses to tie these together? You know, don’t you? “yes, the Lord will give what is *good*, and our land will yield its increase” (Psalm 85:12).

⁹ Bales, *How Do I Know I’m Saved?*, pp. 26-27.

This is where justice and mercy kiss. It turns out the Bible uses the word “goodness” and the word “justice” together quite often, but the first word is a broader concept with a larger goal. You see, the Greeks defined justice as “the quality which gives a man what is due to him,” while goodness is “the quality which is out to do far more than that, and which desires to give a man all that is to his benefit and his help.” In other words, “The man who is just sticks to the letter of his bond; the man who is good goes far beyond it.”¹⁰ As we use the words, “justice” seems to be on the opposite end of the spectrum of “mercy.”¹¹ But with God it is different.¹²

If you find yourself on the wrong side...if you discover that, for some reason, you have chosen the way of the flesh...it turns out the language of justice can be turned into the language of forgiveness.

Hear Volf again: “The difference between justice and forgiveness” is this: “to be just is to condemn the fault, and, because of the fault, to condemn the doer as well. To forgive is to condemn the fault but to spare the doer. That’s what the forgiving God does.”¹³

My God is good. He’s good. He is “generous, open-handed and open-hearted.”¹⁴ He’s good to bring justice to the oppressed. And He’s good to even offer mercy to every former oppressor. He protects and defends his people (like any good protector should). And he sees you not in your sin but in your Savior, and he sees them—yes THEM—through the lens of what they could be, and he holds out hope that they will turn from the road they are on. Turn from the path that ties them to the justice that must be rendered. But if they will fall at His feet, if they will turn from their wicked ways, God will hear from heaven and forgive.

How do I know he will do that for THEM? Because He did that for me.

¹⁰ William Barclay, *Flesh and Spirit: An Examination of Galatians 5:19-23* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), p.105.

¹¹ A soldier in Napoleon’s army was sentenced to death. “Mercy” cried his mother. “Give him mercy.” “Your son doesn’t deserve mercy,” said the commanding general. “I know,” said the mother, “if he deserved it, it wouldn’t be mercy.”

¹² William Barclay, *Flesh and Spirit*, p.106: “In justice there is no real room for pity and mercy, for pity and mercy would do no more than interfere with the course of abstract justice. In goodness pity and mercy are integral parts, for goodness is the generosity which is undeserved.”

¹³ Found here:

https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/6215.Miroslav_Volf#:~:text=God's%20justice%20and%20so%20rediscover%20one's%20own%20sinfulness.%E2%80%9D&text=%E2%80%9CThe%20difference%20between%20justice%20and,what%20the%20forgiving%20God%20does.%E2%80%9D

¹⁴ William Barclay’s definition of goodness, *Flesh and Spirit*, p.107.

If you are oppressed, God is good to you. He will fight for you; he will protect you. He will bring judgment against the evil doers and he will not spare those who refuse to spare you. That's his goodness at work.

If you are the oppressor—whether you held the coats as they stoned Christians, or whether you have let the evil one use you to bring shame upon the name of Christ, or whether you have allowed sin to reign in your life so that you are part of the problem in a world that runs counter to the story of Christ—hear this: Christ came into this world to say “judgment is coming, but I want you with me when that time comes. I want you. There isn't a person I've made, there isn't a person I've made that I want lost. Not one. Oh Jerusalem. Oh Nineveh. Oh Searcy, and Charlotte, Hollywood, Washington, Tel Aviv, and Moscow. I want everybody. And I will shower you with my mercy and love. The price—the price for all your wickedness has been paid. And in my great forgiveness, where I transfer what belongs to you and give it to my Son, so that what belongs to my Son may belong to you, you will see my justice and mercy kiss each other. I will be both just and the justifier. And you will say, “truly, God is good to those that love Him.” When you see justice, when you see mercy, and when you can trust me on both counts, because I am faithful, says the Lord. “For he is good, for he is good, for he is good to me.”