

THE GOODNESS AND SEVERITY OF GOD

Speaking to the Gentile believers in the church at Rome, the apostle Paul exhorts, “Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God’s kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off” (Romans 11:22).¹ In explaining the role of Jew and Gentile in God’s plan for the redemption of mankind, Paul uses the illustration of the olive tree. Natural branches (fleshly Israel) were broken off so that wild olive branches (the Gentiles) could be grafted in among the remaining natural branches. In this picturesque fashion, Paul warns:

But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree, do not be arrogant toward the branches. If you are, remember it is not you who support the root, but the root that supports you. Then you will say, “Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.” That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. Note then the kindness and the severity of God (Romans 11:17-22a, ESV).

Consider God’s *kindness*, his *goodness*, his *generosity*, says Paul. Consider God’s mercy and grace, his salvation given through the good news of Jesus. This has been given to you who are Gentiles, who are not of God’s “physical” family, and who were “once disobedient.” But this same good news, God’s working through Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah, brought *severity* or a

¹Unless noted otherwise, all biblical quotations are from the *English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001).

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cutting off to the Jews, the people of God, because they stumbled in unbelief. So be thankful for the goodness of God; but fear his severity.

Today, we should pause and ponder both the *goodness* and the *severity* of God. We delight in experiencing the goodness of God. From his loving kindness, we derive enjoyment and pleasure. Perhaps this is because “goodness in God as in man, means something admirable, attractive, and praiseworthy” [James I. Packer, *Knowing God*]. We like a good man. We enjoy talking about him and his deeds of kindness. We also like a good God. We find satisfaction in speaking to others about his acts of love. But to say, “God is good,” means much more than saying, “God is kind and gracious in all his dealings with man.” When the biblical writers call God *good*, they are referring to his *moral perfection*, his *righteousness*, his *holiness*. The Greek word in Romans 11:22, translated “goodness” in the *King James Version* and “kindness” in the *New American Standard Version*, is *chrestotes* and is used by Paul in Romans 3:12 where he quotes from Psalm 14: “No one does *good* [Greek, *chrestotes*], not even one.” Paul appeals to the Psalm to justify his conclusion: “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). Paul is not denying that man has the ability to be kind or perform acts of goodness. This would contradict his previous statement—“but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good [Greek *agathon*]” (Romans 2:10). Rather, Paul is saying that no man has attained moral perfection, the moral perfection or ultimate goodness that belongs to God alone.

But God is just and requires this moral perfection of mankind. Due to his righteous nature, God cannot tolerate sin. Man is in a hopeless, lost condition. Thus it became necessary

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for God to send his son Jesus—the God-Man—to satisfy his just requirement of perfection and, at the same time, make it possible for man to be brought once again into a friendly relationship with God, to be righteous before God with the righteousness that is by faith in Jesus. In this way, God is both *just* and *justifier* of the one who has faith in Jesus (see Romans 3:26).

This relationship of God’s goodness, his moral perfection, to mankind’s salvation has very important implications. God’s goodness supplies the *reason* for God acting through Christ on man’s behalf. As a logical statement: (1) God is good, morally perfect, and demands this perfection in his creatures; (2) man is not good, morally imperfect, and cannot by himself satisfy God’s righteous demand; so (3) God himself provides *the* solution through Christ.

Another passage that uses the Greek word *chrestotes* [“goodness”] is Romans 2:4. Here Paul asks, “Do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?” Paul is not talking about God’s acts of kindness or goodness that he shows to all mankind, although such would be implied. Paul primarily is saying, by means of a rhetorical question, that the person who criticizes the defects in others should think about his own weaknesses in light of God’s matchless perfection. Not until a person sees God’s perfect goodness will he or she come to admit his or her own efforts for guidance and security as useless and vain. When any person thinks seriously and soberly about the riches of God’s moral perfection (such as blessings in Christ and fellowship and communion with the Creator), then that person will repent or “change their mind” (from the Greek word *metanoeo*), give up futile efforts to attain happiness by his or her own means, and then turn to God for completeness and happiness in life (that is to say, salvation).

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Therefore, the fact of God's goodness supplies not only the reason for God acting through Christ on man's behalf but also the *incentive* for humans to repent and to accept God's gift of grace. As a logical statement: (1) God is good, morally perfect, the embodiment of true happiness; (2) man is not good, morally imperfect, and cannot by himself find true happiness; so (3) man needs to repent, to turn from his selfish pursuit of happiness to God's way—the gift of true joy and peace found in Jesus Christ.

In a similar way, the Old Testament declares the goodness of God. Paul is not speaking in a vacuum when writing to the Romans about God's goodness. In Exodus 33:18-19, Moses asked God, "Please show me your glory." The Lord replied, "I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name 'The Lord.'" When the Lord descended to Moses to show him the fullness of his goodness, he passed by in front of Moses and said:

The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation (Exodus 34:6b-7).

God here makes known the totality of his matchlessness—his tenderness, his mercy, his patience, his kindness, his faithfulness, his righteousness, and his forgiveness. God reveals to Moses all these attributes that together make up his *goodness* or his *perfectness* in all aspects of his essence or being. In all that he is or does, God is good or perfect. And in this sense, *only* God is good.

But we can speak more about God's goodness. Within the sphere of God's moral perfection (his goodness in the absolute sense) is God's generosity (his goodness in a specialized or more specific sense). God's generosity is his free, unrestrained, unreserved, and beneficial

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action on man's behalf in spite of man's unworthiness. In other words, mankind does not deserve the generosity or goodness of God, but God bestows his goodness on mankind in every way. It can be said that God's generosity is "the focal point of his moral perfection" [James I. Packer, *Knowing God*]. It is the quality regulating how God's other attributes are exhibited toward mankind. In all his dealings with human beings, whether it is God's love, mercy, justice, or forgiveness, God is abundant, overflowing, and never-ending. God is generous! God is good! As the psalmist says, "The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The Lord is good to all, and his mercy is over all that he has made" (Psalm 145:8-9).

In Psalm 145, the author talks about God as the great provider. God gives help to "all who are falling" (v. 14). God powerfully revives lost hope and depleted energies. He "raises up all who are bowed down" (v. 14). Or, as the *New English Bible* expressively translates, "He straightens backs which are bent." God provides food for all his creatures, so that the psalmist can say, "The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season. You open your hand; you satisfy the desire of every living thing. The Lord is righteous in all his ways and kind in all his works" (vv. 15-17). Praise God from whom all blessings flow! The storehouses of heaven constantly flood mankind with gifts of love and kindness. "Every meal, every pleasure, every possession, every bit of sunshine, every nights sleep, every moment of health and safety, everything else that sustains and enriches life, is a divine gift" (James I. Packer, *Knowing God*). And these gifts are given to saint and sinner alike, because the Lord "makes his sun rise on the just and the unjust" (Matthew 5:45).

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The wicked amazingly fail to honor the Lord for his mercies, so they carp, grumble, and complain. God, being “righteous in all his ways,” does not appreciate unthankfulness and withholds the full measure of his goodness from the wicked. So even though the Lord is good to both righteous and unrighteous in some ways, the Lord is good to the righteous in all ways. The Lord reserves the full measure of his goodness for his people, for those who honor and respect God’s goodness. “The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. He fulfills the desire of those who fear him; he also hears their cry and saves them. The Lord preserves all who love him, but all the wicked he will destroy” (Psalm 145:18-20). God gives a saving answer—a tremendous promise and blessing—to his people who pray. He also provides protection and preservation from harm, as he with steadfast love and a sheltering arm watches over and shields his own. This is God’s assurance and blessing, his commitment, to his people. So while we may say that to the sinner the Lord is good, we must say that to the saint the Lord is *very* good and *very* generous.

In talking about God’s goodness, however, we must use caution. Too many, even God’s people, have the idea that God is like the grandparent who spoils his or her offspring’s child. After the little one has hurled his first baseball through his mother’s china cabinet glass, grandma restrains the boy’s mother and says, “Don’t spank him; he didn’t mean any harm!” This permissive, non-judicial response comes close to what many believe to be true about God. It’s the idea of a Santa Claus god—a big, nice, giant who flies through the sky, gives gifts and pleasure to all, and never gives out any discipline or punishment. This is not the biblical view of God. Paul tells the Romans not only about God’s goodness but also about God’s severity.

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In our opening scripture, *severity* (from the Greek word *apotomian*) literally means “a cutting off.” It indicates, in context, God’s severity in cutting off or rejecting “physical” Israel in order to bring salvation to the Gentiles. From this sharp excision by God is an important lesson for the Gentiles—a lesson that should produce reverence and awe for God’s work among human beings. Paul says:

So do not become proud, but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. Note then the kindness and severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God’s kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off (Romans 11:20b-22).

In these words of Paul is our lesson: as a consequence of every expression of God’s goodness is severe judgment if that goodness is mocked. Sooner or later those who refuse God’s goodness through Jesus Christ will be “cut off.” In the more harsh words of the apostle:

Because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed. He will render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury (Romans 2:5-8).

But God is not quick to execute his severity. The Lord “is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). Appropriately, we should “count the patience of the Lord as salvation” (2 Peter 3:15a). We should consider his goodness and avoid his severity. We should count our blessings and appreciate God’s longsuffering. Think of how he tolerates our rebellious nature and our unworthiness. We should love him for his love, and repent. Otherwise, we will suffer the misfortune of his more severe discipline. Just remember, if God has put thorns in our bed, it is only to keep us from falling into complacency.

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This discipline of love is part of his goodness and is meant to keep us from experiencing the full measure of his severity. In this light, even his severity is part of his goodness. As the writer of Hebrews says, “Do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives” (Hebrews 12:5b-6). Behold then, the goodness and the severity of God!