

God Is Good

Last week in Colorado there was a most unusual car crash that made the national news. A woman who was nine months pregnant was driving with her seven-year old son and her younger daughter. She swerved to avoid an accident, lost control of her vehicle, went off the side of the road and the car rolled over into a ditch. She was thrown out of the car window, broke her neck and lay bleeding on the ground. Her daughter was trapped inside of the vehicle but her seven year old son was able to get out and run for help.

The boy went up to the highway and put out his thumb like a hitchhiker to flag down whomever would help. A car immediately stopped and the passengers rolled down the windows and he explained all that had just happened. After hearing his story they started up the car and just drove off. He waited on the shoulder of the road for the next car to come along. He again put out his thumb. The next car also stopped. He again went through a complete explanation and unlike the passengers in the previous car these people got out, they provided help, they called in the paramedics who were able to get the little girl out of the car. She had no significant injuries but the mother was taken to a hospital where she had to undergo surgery for her broken neck that day. It was the next day after the surgery that she went into labor and gave birth to a healthy child. The day after the delivery of the child she began to recover some sensation and use of her arms and legs and by Friday the news report was that they expected a full recovery. She is expected to be released from the hospital in two to four weeks.

After hearing that story my question to you is, what do you think of the people in the two different cars that came by? If you take that limited amount of information you would probably be tempted to say that the people in the first car were bad and what they did was bad and that the people in the second car were good and what they did was good. Both had the power and opportunity to help.

The next question is how all of this compares to God. For all of us from time to time are involved in crashes and calamities within our own lives and our response is usually to run to God and ask him for help in the midst of our desperation. How do we expect God to respond? Is he good or is he bad? Whether this great and powerful God of the universe is good or bad makes all the difference in our lives and in the universe. I'm convinced that what we believe about the goodness or badness of God shapes our perspective on virtually everything that we

say or do all of our lives. Everything in life hinges on this critical question.

Many of your parents taught you the childhood prayer that began, "God is great, God is good." The theology of that simple prayer affects our perspective on everything that we say and believe.

One day a very wealthy man came to talk to Jesus and started with a very good question. I'll not tell you the whole story. You can read it for yourself in Mark chapter 10. The man's question was this: "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus' answer began with the very first word in the rich man's question. I think the man, simply out of courtesy, started by saying, "Good teacher," but Jesus answered, "No one is good — except God alone." I suppose it sounded as if Jesus was changing the subject, but in fact he wasn't. He was really starting at the beginning. Our eternal destiny depends upon the assertion that God is good and we are not.

There is a difference between saying that "God is good" and "God does good." The Bible clearly teaches that God is good. In other words, goodness begins with God. He did not wake up one morning and decide to be good — it's just the way he is. It would be impossible for God to be God and not be good. All definitions of goodness have their beginning in the statement that God is good.

I know that this can sound really theoretical but its really important. There are many Americans today who frequently say in one form or another that all truth and all goodness is relative, it is personal. My truth is my truth, your truth is your truth, even though they may be completely contradictory. What's good for you is good because you say it is good. The only absolute is that there are no absolutes.

The way you test this approach is with specifics. Is it good that Hitler killed millions of people in the Holocaust, for apparently it seemed good to him? Is it

good that some people molest young children? Apparently it's good to them. Or is it good that a carload of people in

Colorado denied the pleas for help from a seven year old boy whose mother was desperately injured?

Almost everyone would say, "Of course not. All of those things were very bad." How do you know that? How do you know what is good and what is bad? What is the source of that knowledge of good and of evil? What is the standard from which that comes?

As a Christian and on the basis of the Bible, I

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would say that God is that standard. Goodness is what fits with God; evil is what doesn't fit with God. Centuries ago there was an interesting dilemma in the business community of Vienna, Austria. Every merchant had a different definition of the length of a meter. When you were buying cloth you could be cheated by a salesman who said he was selling you four meters but was really only giving you three for the same money that a different merchant across the street would charge for four meters. To solve the problem an iron rod that is one meter, roughly three feet long, was imbedded in the outer wall of St. Stephen's Cathedral. It became the standard measure of a meter in Vienna. You can visit Vienna today and the measure of a meter is still there for you to compare.

By comparison the standard of goodness is God. Centuries ago the Bible was written to tell us who God is, what God is like and the standards of truth and goodness. You and I may have a discussion or a debate about what is good and what is not and then we can go together, not to the side of a cathedral but to the Bible, and compare our opinions to the divine standard of what is good and what is not, what is right and what is wrong.

At the very beginning of the Bible in Genesis there is a familiar story. Even to those who have never read the Bible there is a familiarity with the story of the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve were given everything in this paradise for their benefit with one restriction. They were forbidden to eat the fruit of one particular tree because God said that it was not good for them. Now for some period of time they lived with that restriction because they had fabulous goodness at their disposal. But one day they started to reconsider God's definition of good and they decided that the fruit on that tree needed to be added to their menu, that it would be good. They decided to eat it and the results were deadly.

Adam and Eve decided that their judgment of good and evil was better than God's. It was the worst possible mistake they could make. Their story is repeated everyday around the world when people who may be fully familiar with God and the Bible and the Ten Commandments decide that it is good to lie, to steal, to cheat, to commit sexual sin. They'll say, "Well, I think it would be good for my career, be good for my bank account. It would be good in that it would feel good. It would be good for a particular relationship that I want to grow closer." They are choosing their measurement of good and right instead of God's.

As Christians we ought be committed to the truth that God is the one who is good, that goodness is defined in terms of him. There is nothing about God that

is bad. He is good; he loves good; he thinks good; he is good; he does good.

But God is not good because of what he does. He does what he does because of who he is. And that's true for most of us. The actions that are part of our lives are the outgrowth of the character that we have. You would expect that a good God would do good things. The first report of the good that God does is in the first chapter of the Bible. The overview of God's creation of the heavens and the earth ends with the words, "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good." (Genesis 1:31)

It was very good in lots of ways. First of all, it worked. The earth worked. It was functional. It was technically good. I've been intrigued in following the Land Rover on Mars. It has sent back millions of pieces of information to us. One of the pieces of information that was reported is that the temperature there can drop or rise as much as thirty or forty degrees in as short a period as five seconds. When you think of the temperature changing so dramatically you begin to appreciate what we have here on earth. While we some-

times complain about how hot it is in the summer and how cold it is in the winter,

The message is clear and powerful. God is present. He has everything under control.

it is actually a very narrow range.

The world, the universe, that God created was good in every way. It was technically good in design and function. But more than that, it was very good esthetically. We often say that it's a beautiful fall day, look at the colors and the trees; or it's a gorgeous summer day, look at the beautiful plants and flowers. When we look at spectacular sights like the mountains or the ocean we realize that creation doesn't just function efficiently, it looks good! God is an artist as well.

But then there's the rest of the story. And the rest of the story is that evil came into God's creation and contaminated the whole thing, including us. Sin is like a virus that has permeated everything, not just the genetic makeup of us human beings but all of the rest of God's creation as well and left the world and us terminally ill with evil. Now we are caught in the midst of a conflict, a fight for life, and that is the story of the Bible.

You can read the Bible from cover to cover and every page in one way or another is about this conflict between good and evil. Our lives are that way. There are days that we think that evil is going to win. You look at the problems in the world, the disasters in individual lives and you say, "There's no way. The world's going to be destroyed and we're going to do it in. There is no going back." The Bible says the re-

sult of the final conflict will be God's triumph — that his doing of good will prevail over that which is evil. There are times that that is hard to believe. So that is why it is a matter of faith.

Faith in God is the conviction that God is great and that God is good and that eventually in this terrible conflict, this fight for life, God will prevail and God will win. However, right now we live in the midst of this terrible battle. Around us and in us we see sin and sickness and problems and calamity but we can also see the goodness of God. If we love, if we believe, it is clearly there. God has not given up. God has not stopped being good and God will not stop being good.

Woven throughout the Bible are lines that people have written who believe this. In Psalm 100:5 the songwriter says, "The Lord is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations." God's goodness and greatness were not just for Bible times but for us now. Psalm 25:8 tells us, "Good and upright is the Lord; therefore he instructs sinners in his ways." God gives instructions in this conflict between good and evil. In the obscure little Old Testament book of Nahum, chapter 1 and verse 7 says, "The Lord is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him." That is saying that when we're battered by all of the evil in our world, there is a place to go and find refuge — to hide and find security. God is our refuge.

Now all of this is to say that God is still good and that God is doing good. He is active in our world. He is constantly turning what is bad into what is good. He never quits, he never gets tired and he never gives up.

Let's suppose you could make a list of everything you want. Your list includes good health, good job, good money, good friends and good times — five things. You look at your wish list to see how you're doing and realize you have only one out of five or maybe zero out of five. You say, "God is neither great or good as far as I'm concerned!" So what's going on here?

Listen carefully. Each of us must decide if we are going to interpret God by our circumstances or we are going to interpret our circumstances by God. If life is tough and circumstances rule, we may conclude that God is bad. If we truly believe that God is good then we will hold to that belief even though our circumstances are difficult. Which attitude we choose makes all the difference in our lives.

Now at the same time we must not forget that evil

is real. It is a terrible virus of sin that has messed up God's good creation. The Bible is clear that God hates sin. He was the one who designed everything to work out perfectly — both technically and esthetically. That's why the Bible says that God hates evil and sin. He hates it when it wrecks our lives and causes all the difficulties and problems in our lives. When evil slams us, no one cares more than God.

But the principle that is so powerful is that God is going to stick with doing good no matter what, no matter how difficult, no matter how long. He will fight against evil in our world every minute of every day. He will not cease to push us toward that which is good and that which is right. God is willing to let us suffer and even make us miserable to accomplish what is good and right and best in our lives and in our world. Not stopping, even if he's bad-mouthed for doing it. Because he is God. That's who he is. He's our father who is great and who is good.

Some years ago I met two college students after the morning service. They were brothers, both attending a local college. In conversation I asked, "So, what brought you here to church today?" One of them answered, "Our dad." And I said, "Great, is he here?" He explained that his dad back in Illinois calls both of them every Sunday morning to wake them up and tells them to go to church. These guys looked tired. They looked like they'd been up late the night before. They

didn't say they were ungrateful for the calls but I suspected that they would have rather slept in. Now he never said this but I suspect that their dad called back at night and

asked about where they went to church.

The point is that their dad was determined to do good for them whether they liked it or not because that's what a good dad is supposed to do.

God is our father, he's our dad, who is far better than any earthly father. He is good and he does good. He can't help himself. So he keeps pushing good on us. If he has to confront us, he'll confront us; if he has to wake us up, he'll wake us up. If he has to encourage us he will encourage us. He will do whatever he needs to do because God is good.

There is a very special and intense application of this goodness of God in the lives of Christians, followers of Jesus Christ. In the Bible it is called grace. It is more than the general good which God does everywhere. It is targeted specifically to Christians to give us the goodness of God in a special way since we are followers of Jesus Christ.

God focuses his goodness on us much like a

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mother or a father on earth would do for their child, generously giving the very best. There's this wonderful line in the New Testament in James 1:17 that says, "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights who does not change like shifting shadows." That is to say that there is nothing that is good or perfect in our lives that does not come from God.

If you make a list of all the really good stuff, it all comes from God. Now I think we agree with that theoretically but in reality most of us don't believe that way. Most of us think, "I've got money because I am smart, because I work hard, because I made some good investments. I'm healthy because I eat the right food and I exercise." But that's simply not true. Every good and perfect gift comes from the Father. God is the ultimate benefactor of everything that is good in our lives.

God's grace to us is something truly amazing. In the New Testament in Romans 5:8 we're told that while we were still sinners Christ died for us. Now that has profound truth in it. Before we were interested in God, when we were alienated from him, God took the initiative in the ultimate sacrifice of giving his son — not to friends, but to enemies. Before we cared or asked for help, he sent his son to die on the cross to pay for human sin. That means that God is always the initiator of grace. It means that God always goes the extra mile, that he's always thinking up ways to help us. He always wants to forgive us and to go on doing what is good and right.

One of the ways of testing any truth is to push it to its extreme, so let's try it. What if someone carefully thinks through what is right and chooses to do what is wrong? What if that person decides to take advantage of God's grace and sin now and ask for forgiveness later? Will God then forgive that person who deliberately does what's wrong with the intent of asking for forgiveness afterwards? The answer is yes, he will. That stretches me further than I want to stretch. It doesn't totally make sense to me. It seems to me to be too generous, too forgiving, too good — but that's who God is.

Please understand that God is not stupid. He's not setting himself up to be ripped off. He doesn't let us ruin our lives with sin and act like it never happened. Sometimes his grace requires some pretty severe discipline to straighten us out. But the point here is that God's grace is outrageous — it's beyond our comfort zone. God keeps on giving and giving and forgiving. It is amazing. It's grace.

There's a great line in John 1:16 which says, "From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another." It's a picture of the won-

derful fullness of the goodness of God that overflows to us. God's grace overflows with blessing after blessing.

I sometimes imagine that one day in heaven we may go to the library and sit at the computer console, enter our names to look up our story and have our breath taken away. What we thought were rather ordinary events with ordinary explanations in reality happened to us because of the fullness of the outrageous grace of God. We were experiencing blessing after blessing after blessing. That is the integrating motif of our biographies — the glue that holds it all together — blessing after blessing from the grace of God. Because God is good. If you only know a few things about God, know that God is good.

Our family has a Plymouth Voyager mini van with an overhead console that tells you how many gallons of gas you have, how far you can go before you'll run out of gas, the temperature and it has a compass that tells you the direction you are headed. There have been a few times on family vacations and outings in unfamiliar territory where I have been the driver and have been absolutely convinced that I was going south but the compass said "north." I've been tempted to go by my instinct rather than by the compass — except I'm convinced that the compass is right even if that's not the way I feel.

There are times in our lives when circumstances swirl around us and our instinct says, "God is not good," yet we look at the instrument panel and it says God is good. The instrument panel from God's Bible has always been reliable in the past. The Bible says that God is good and that his grace abounds, that he gives good and perfect gifts, that he is faithful and that he is outrageously generous. We're going to have to decide whether to go by our feelings or to go by our compass, the Bible. I would encourage you to have no doubt that God is true north. God is good. God does good. God gives good. He is a very good God and his grace is truly amazing.

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