

Of the Goodness of God.

by John Gill

God's goodness is his essential nature of being good, kind, and benevolent, and it is shared among all creatures.

Scripture: Genesis 50:20, Exodus 34:6, Psalm 4:6-7, Psalm 86:5, Psalm 145:9, Matthew 19:17, Romans 11:35-36, 1 Timothy 4:4, James 1:13-14, 1 John 1:5

Topics: "The Goodness of God", "Divine Attributes"

Description

John Gill emphasizes the essential goodness of God, explaining that all divine attributes such as love, grace, and mercy stem from His inherent goodness. He asserts that God's goodness is not only essential and immutable but also the source of all goodness in creation, making Him the ultimate good and the fountain of all happiness. Gill highlights that God's goodness is communicated to all creatures, yet it is especially bestowed upon His elect, showcasing His sovereign will. He concludes that the goodness of God is evident in His actions towards humanity, particularly through the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who each manifest this goodness in unique ways.

Transcript

A Body of Doctrinal Divinity

Book 1--Chapter 16

OF THE GOODNESS OF GOD.

Having treated of the love, grace, mercy, and longsuffering of God, it will be proper to take some notice of his "goodness", from whence they all proceed; for that God loves any of his creatures, in the manner he does, bestows favours upon them, shows mercy to them, and bears much with them, is owing to the goodness of his nature. Hence one of his names and titles by which he is described and made known, is, that of Good; "thou, Lord, art good", (Ps. 86:5) and in many other places; when God proclaimed his name before Moses, this was one part of it, "abundant in goodness" (Ex. 34:6).

Philo says[1], God is the name of goodness. And our English word God seems to be a contraction of the word "Good"; or, however, is the same with the German "Gott" and "Godt"; which came, as it is thought[2], from the Arabic word "Gada", which so signified; so that the German and English name of the divine Being, in common use, is taken from the attribute of his goodness. The name the heathens give to their supreme deity, is "optimus"[3], the "best"; he being not only good, as they supposed, and better than

others, but the best of beings.

Our Jehovah, the true God, is superlatively good; good in the highest degree, good beyond all conception and expression. Cotta in Cicero[4], charges Epicurus with taking away from God the property of the best and most excellent nature, by denying the grace and goodness of God; for what, says he, is better, or what is more excellent, than goodness and beneficence? It is a common notion, Sallustius says[5], that God is good; and Simplicius[6] calls him, the Goodness of goodnesses.

Concerning the goodness of God, let the following things be observed: 1. Goodness is essential to God; without which he would not be God; he, is by nature good[7]. The evil god of Cerdon and Marcion is not the true God; and this goodness being wanting in heathen deities, whatever pretensions may be made unto it, excludes them from the claim of deity; yea, goodness is itself the nature and essence of God; as he is love itself, wisdom itself, &c. so he is goodness itself, and it is himself, it includes his whole nature and essence.

When God promised Moses that he would make "all his goodness" pass before him, it was not a single attribute only which was proclaimed and made known; but the several attributes of mercy, grace, longsuffering, truth, faithfulness, justice, and holiness (Ex. 33:19, 34:6,7). The goodness of God is not distinct from his essence; for then he must be compounded of that, and his essence; which is contrary to his simplicity: he is good in and of himself, and by his own essence; and not by participation of another; for if he was not good of himself, and by his own essence, but of and by another; then there would be some being both better than him, and prior to him; and so he would not be the eternal God, nor an independent Being, since he must depend on that from whence he receives his goodness; nor would he be the most perfect being, since what communicates goodness to him must be more perfect than he: all which, to say of God, is very unbecoming.

It remains, then, that he is essentially good; is so in and of himself, by his own nature and essence. 2. Goodness only belongs to God; he is solely good; "There is none good but one; that is, God"; is the assertion of Christ, (Matthew 19:17) which is to be understood not to the exclusion of the Son, and Spirit of God, who are, with the Father, the one God; and so equally good: but with respect to creatures, who are not of themselves inderivatively and independently good; this is only true of God.

Whatever goodness is in creatures, it is all from him, who made them good originally; or put into them, or bestowed upon them, what goodness they have: what goodness there is in the elect angels, who never sinned; what goodness was in Adam, in a state of innocence; what goodness is in any good man, who partakes of the grace of God, or is or will be in the saints in heaven, is all from God; every good and perfect gift comes from him; nor have creatures anything but what they receive from him; he is the source and fountain of all, and therefore all goodness, originally, ultimately, and solely, is to be referred to God. 3.

God is the "summum bonum", he is t' agayon, as Plato calls him, "the Good"[8]; the chiefest good; the sum and substance of all felicity. Unwearied have been the pursuits of men to attain this; but have always failed, when they place it or expect it in anything out of God, and short of him: innumerable have been the sentiments of men about it. Solomon seems to have reduced them to these three, wisdom, riches, and pleasure; and he made an experiment of them, what happiness could be enjoyed in them, as far as a king, a wise man, and a good man, could go; and when he had finished it, pronounced all "vanity and vexation of spirit".

God only can make men happy; he is the Father of mercies, the Fountain of all goodness, the Source of all felicity. There may be a show of happiness in such and such outward circumstances of life, some may be in, with respect to the above things; but there is no solidity in them; he is the only "happy man whose God is the Lord", (Ps. 144:12-15) wherefore good men, who are sensible of the vanity of the creature, and all creature enjoyments, pant after him, and are importunately desirous of the enjoyment of him, and cannot be satisfied without him, placing all their happiness in him: while others are saying, "Who will show us any good?" taking up their contentment in worldly good; they say, "Lord, lift thou up the light of thy countenance upon us"; which gives the greatest pleasure, joy, and satisfaction, that can be had (Ps. 4:6,7 52:1, 73:25). 4.

There is nothing but goodness in God, and nothing but goodness comes from him; there is no iniquity in him, nothing evil in his nature, no unrighteousness in any of his ways and works; he is "light" itself; all purity, holiness, truth, and goodness; "and in him is no darkness at all", of sin, error, and ignorance, (1 John 1:5) nor does anything that is evil come from him; he is not the author of sin, nor does he impel, nor persuade to it, nor tempt with it; but strongly forbids it, under pain of his displeasure, (James 1:13, 14) indeed, his decree is concerned about it; for it could not be, he not willing it by his permissive will; but then, though he suffers it to be, he overrules it for good; as in the case of the selling of Joseph, (Gen. 50:20) the evil of punishment of sin, or of affliction, is from God; in this sense "there is no evil in a city, and the Lord hath not done it", (Amos 3:6) but then punishment of sin is a good, as it is a vindication of the honour of divine justice, and of the righteous law of God; and the affliction of the people of God is for their good; and all evil things of that kind work for their good, both here and hereafter. 5.

God is infinitely good; as his understanding, wisdom, knowledge, and other perfections of his, are infinite; so is his goodness; he is abundant in it; it is so great, that it cannot be said how great it is; finite minds cannot comprehend it; the height, depth, length, and breadth of it, are unmeasurable; it knows no bounds nor limits; it is so perfect that nothing can be added to it: the goodness of a creature extends not to God, nor is it capable of communicating any to him, "who hath first given to him", &c. (Rom. 11:35, 36). 6.

God is immutably and eternally good; the goodness of creatures is but as the morning cloud, and early dew, which soon passes away; of which there has been instances in angels and men: but the goodness of God is invariably the same, and endures continually; and though there has been, and are, such large communications of it to creatures, it is the same as ever, and remains an inexhaustible fountain. 7. The goodness of God is communicative and diffusive; he is good, and he does good; "the whole earth is full of his goodness", (Ps. 119:68, 33:5) there is not a creature but what partakes of it, more or less, in some manner or another; but then it is communicated according to his sovereign will and pleasure.

A heathen writer[9] argues the goodness of God from the existence of the world; since it is by the goodness of God the world is, God must be always good. 8. This attribute of goodness belongs to each divine person, Father, Son, and Spirit; when Christ says, as quoted above, "there is none good but one, that is, God", it is to be understood not of God personally considered, or of one person, to the exclusion of the other; but of God essentially considered: and the design of Christ was, to raise the mind of the young man to whom he spoke, to an higher opinion of himself than what he had; even of him, not as a mere man, whom, as such, he called good; but as the true God, to whom this epithet, in its highest sense, only belongs: and it is predicated of the Father, (2 Chron. 30:18) of Christ, (John 10:11) and of the Spirit, (Neh. 9:20; Ps. 143:10) and they must, indeed, in the same sense, be good, since they partake of one common undivided nature and essence (1 John 5:7).

The goodness of God, with respect to each of the objects of it, may be considered as general and special; in like manner as his love and mercy. There is the general goodness of God, which is as extensive as his mercy; "The Lord is good to all, and his tender mercies are over all his works" (Ps. 145:9). All creatures are made by God, and as they came from him, they are all very good; there is a goodness put into them, whereby they become good and beneficial to others, and especially to men: there is a goodness in inanimate creatures, in the metals and minerals of the earth; in the luminaries of the heavens, the sun, moon, and stars; they are pleasant, good to look at, their form, magnitude, and splendour: they are profitably good; by their light they themselves are seen, and other objects; by this men see to walk and work, and do the several businesses of life; and through their kind and benign influences shed on the earth, many precious fruits are brought forth, and the advantages of them all men share in; God "makes his sun to rise on the evil and on the good", (Matthew 5:45) which is one great instance of his general goodness.

In the vegetable creation there is a large display of the goodness of God; some herbs, plants, and trees, being good for medicine, others for food, both for the cattle of the field and for the service of men (Ps. 104:14, 15). Among the animals, some are for one use, and some for another, and many are meat for men; and even every creature of God is good, and to be received with thanksgiving, (1 Tim. 4:4) and all creatures, both men and beast, partake of the goodness of God in the preservation of them, (Ps. 36:6; 1 Tim. 4:10) and in the provision of food for them (Ps. 104:27,28, 145:15, 16, 147:8; Acts 14:16, 17, 17:25, 28; 1 Tim. 4:8).

There is indeed a difference made by God in the distribution of his general goodness, in the effects of it; which are not imparted to all creatures alike. God gives more of his goodness to men than to brutes; since he gives them reason and understanding; whereby they become more knowing, and to be wiser than the beasts of the field, and the fowls of the heavens, (Job 35:11) and angels have a greater share of his goodness than men; who excel as in strength, so in wisdom and knowledge; hence man is said to be made a little lower than the angels, (Ps. 8:5) and some men have a greater share in the general and providential goodness of God than others; either have larger endowments of mind, are the wise and prudent of the world; or have more comeliness, strength, and health of body; or are possessed of greater wealth and riches (Eccl. 9:11).

The special goodness of God, as to the effects of it, elect angels, and elect men, only partake of, which is sovereign and distinguishing; God is good to the elect angels, in choosing them in Christ, preserving them from apostasy, confirming them in the estate they were created in, granting them nearness to himself, and many other peculiar favours; when the angels that sinned are not spared by him, but are reserved to judgment (1 Tim. 5:21; 2 Peter 2:4). Elect men, the spiritual and mystical Israel of God, have a share in his special goodness; "truly God is good to Israel", (Ps. 73:1) and that in a very distinguishing manner, as he is not to reprobates; "the election hath obtained" all the special blessings of goodness, grace here, and glory hereafter; light, life, and happiness; while "the rest" are "blinded", (Rom. 11:7) they are made to differ from others thereby in time, and to all eternity; and yet among them there are different displays of divine goodness in the present state; some have greater spiritual gifts for usefulness than others; some have larger measures of grace; though they have all the same grace, yet not to the same degree; they have all alike precious faith, but in some it is weaker, in others stronger; and some have more spiritual light in the Gospel, and more spiritual peace and joy, and larger discoveries of the love of God, and have more communion with him.

All which must be referred to his sovereign good will and pleasure. Many are the acts and instances of divine goodness to the people of God in common. It has been observed, that the attribute of "goodness", and the epithet of "good", belong to each of the three divine persons, Father, Son, and Spirit; and they have each of them manifested their goodness in acts of it. Jehovah the Father, has displayed his goodness to his special people, in his good designs towards them, and thoughts of them; in setting them apart for himself, his own glory, and their good; in laying up all good things for them in Christ, and in the covenant of his grace; in making promises of good things to them, both for this life, and that which is to come; and in bestowing good gifts on them, the gift of himself, the gift of his Son, and the gift of his Spirit; and all the blessings of goodness, as of adoption, justification, pardon of sin, &c. and all the graces of the Spirit, as the gift of faith, of repentance, of a good hope of eternal life, and also the gift of eternal life itself.

Jehovah the Son, has manifested his goodness to the same persons; in becoming a Surety, and undertaking for their good; in partaking of their nature, in which good will to men was expressed; and in working out the great and good work of their redemption and salvation; he is the good Shepherd, and has shown himself to be so, by laying down his life for the sheep, and by providing a good fold, and good pasture for them: he is, and has been, in all ages, the Fountain of goodness and grace to all his people, for the supply of all their wants; and he ever lives to speak a good word, and intercede for good things for them.

Jehovah the Spirit, is good unto them, as a Teacher, Sanctifier, and Comforter of them, as a Spirit of adoption, grace, and supplication; as the author of the good work of grace in them; as the guide of them through this world; and as the earnest and pledge of their future glory, and a sealer of them up unto the day of redemption. ENDNOTES:

[1] Leg. Alleg. l. 2. p. 74.

[2] Vid. Hinckelman. Praefat. ad Alkoran.

[3] "Optimus maximus quidem ante optimus, id est, beneficentissimus quam maximus", Cicero de Natura Deorum, l. 2.

[4] Ibid. l. 1. prope finem.

[5] De Diis, c. 1.

[6] In Epictetum.

[7] agayov gar hn fusei, Hierocles in Carmin. Pythag. p. 21.

[8] De Republica, l. 6. p. 687.

[9] Sallust de Diis, c. 7.

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