

GOD IS GOOD

THE GOODNESS OF GOD 1

If we do not know God, we cannot know goodness.



T. M. MOORE

A REVISION STUDY FROM
THE FELLOWSHIP OF AILBE

God is Good

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The Fellowship of Ailbe

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God is Good

Welcome to *God is Good*

Whatever it is, *good* is a state desirable to all people. Everyone wants to enjoy a good life, to have good friends, enjoy good times, and feel good about themselves. Good is, well, *good*, and everyone seems to know that.

But knowing just what *is* good – well, that can be a problem. People want to define goodness on their own terms, and to their own advantage, and that makes of the idea of *good* a relative and unreliable goal.

By looking to God, Who alone is good, we can gain insight and understanding into the true nature of *good*, and begin to bring our lives into line with that standard, for the benefit of ourselves and everyone.

God is good, and if we want to have a good life and do good in it, we must look to God.

ReVision studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We're happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 God is Good

Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance? Romans 2.4

Good, yes, but...

“God is great, God is good. Let us thank Him for our food.”

Probably most of us learned that prayer as children, and prayed it, and have taught it to our own children. It's a fine prayer, and it asserts a most important idea about God, an idea many people today seem to have overlooked.

God is good.

Who doesn't want a large measure of good in his life? We rejoice at good news. We like to acquire good things, or to visit places and do things that make us feel good. We delight in a good meal, rejoice in good friends and good times, and we invoke wishes for good on all the people we know and love.

Good is, well, *good*, and we just can't get enough of it.

So if *God* is good, why is it more people aren't enjoying Him? There are two reasons for this

God's good and ours

First, our understanding of *good* has become so skewed that we think of *good* primarily in self-interested terms – good for *me*, that is. People today reserve the right to define the terms of good, and they invariably define them to their own advantage, comfort, or wellbeing.

The problem with this, of course, is that in such a situation, competing ideas of goodness are inevitable, and that can sometimes lead to disagreement or worse. When *good* equates primarily to *what I want*, the idea of *goodness* becomes a miasma of mere self-aggrandizement.

Second, most people have heard that God is good. They probably learned the same prayer you and I did. But they have discovered that what God describes as good does not always or easily cohere with their own idea of good – good for me, that is.

If God, then, harbors ideas about *goodness* that seem to contradict *my ideas* about good-for-me, then God cannot be good, and therefore must be wicked, or oppressive, or unreasonable (take your pick). At any rate, He is not someone to look to when I'm pursuing *my* idea of what is *good for me*.

The apostle Paul would say of such people that they *despise* the goodness of God, preferring instead their own ideas concerning what is good for them. It's no wonder fewer and fewer people are coming to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ.

The goodness of God

Since the goodness (Greek: χρηστότης¹) of God leads to repentance, and repentance is indispensable to knowing the Lord and growing in Him, we who understand this should be more diligent to observe, remark,

¹ χρηστότης (1) ητος f: an event or activity which is useful or benevolent – that which is useful, what is benevolent, benevolence...an equivalent often contains an expression meaning to help. For example, the expression *what is useful* is often rendered as *that which helps people* or *that which proves good* for people (Louw & Nida, emphasis added).

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enjoy, and extol the goodness of God, both to ourselves and to our unbelieving neighbors.

Of course, God's greatest expression of goodness is to have sent Jesus for our salvation. However, He surrounds and inundates us with His goodness day by day, though we take it for granted and fail to bless Him as we should. As Calvin explained, commenting on our text, "...when the Lord deals favorably with his servants and gives them earthly blessings, he makes known to them by symbols of this kind his own benevolence, and trains them up at the same time *to seek the sum and substance of all good things in himself alone...*" (emphasis mine).

We would be more grateful to God, and more prone to praise Him, and to repent of all that displeases Him, if we were more diligent in observing His goodness, as it comes to us at every moment.

It is easy but ungrateful to take for granted such constant blessings as breath and health, or such everywhere-present delights as color or shape or sound, or to think that our possessions or work or relationships, or even our surroundings and environment, are somehow only what we deserve, or exist simply as givens.

God upholds all things and gives us every good and perfect gift, as He works all things according to the counsel of His will. And God does this because He is *good*. Could we bring more of God's goodness into our purview, we might be more constant in prayer, we might encourage our brethren to delight in His goodness, and we might help our unbelieving neighbors be more thoughtful about God, and perhaps inclined to seek Him.

So in this series we consider the goodness of God, to understand *good* as He is and as He intends, and to enjoy God as the greatest *Good* anyone can know.

For reflection

1. Where do people get their ideas about *good*?
2. If everyone has the right to define the terms of *good* and *goodness*, then no reliable standard of *good* or *goodness* can exist. Explain. Why is this not a *good* situation?
3. What comes to mind when you think about the *goodness* of God?

Next steps – Conversation: Talk with a Christian friend about the goodness of God. How does your friend experience His goodness? What is the effect of God's goodness on you and your friend? How can you encourage one another to observe more of God's goodness?

2 Unity and Concord

So Jesus said to him, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God." Luke 18.19

He's all good

The sum and substance of all good is to be found in God, as Calvin observed. This is because God alone is good. God *defines* goodness by Who He is, what He does, and what He wills. The only way to escape a merely self-interested understanding of goodness is to know God and submit to His will. All goodness, and everything that is good, issues from God and expresses His being and will (Jms. 1.17).

The implications of this are enormous. We cannot know what is good for us as individuals and societies apart from knowing God. In any situation in which a moral action is required, we cannot know the good choice unless we know God. In thinking about our life's course, and the many choices and decisions that entails, we will only be able to determine what constitutes the truly good life from within the framework of knowing God and His will.

Now of course, many people who do not know God can do good works, and many do. This may seem to contradict our insistence that people cannot know or do what is good apart from knowing God and submitting to His will. Why is there yet so much that is good in the world, even though ours is an age of unbelief and secularism?

The reason people do good is because they are made in the image of God, and the works of God's Law have been written on their hearts (Rom. 2.14, 15). Everyone has a conscience, and a conscience at peace is more desirable than one haunted by guilt or shame. The conscience, even the seared consciences of those who reject God, reads the Law of God, written on the heart, and strives against mere self-interest to encourage what is good. All people retain a basic knowledge of God, even though they may deny or ignore Him (Rom. 1.18-21). While in the main they may be inclined to pursue goodness in strictly self-interested terms, nevertheless, they will, under the influence of God's Spirit, wooing and guiding them, and piquing their conscience, do many good works in line with the teaching of God's holy and good Law. These do not merit salvation, but they serve to keep the devastating effects of sin in check, and to remind us that a standard of goodness exists which is universally recognizable.

This universal moral standard is what C. S. Lewis referred to as the *Tao* in his book, *The Abolition of Man*. Try as we may to break free of the grip of God and define human beings as merely a higher form of animal, a constant witness to our spiritual provenance and nature can be discerned culture by culture, in the universal norms of goodness that bear witness to a common source and standard.

And that source and standard is God, Who alone is good.

God's goodness begins here

But what *is* God, that He is good? We may discern the true nature of goodness, and therefore of what is truly good for us, by knowing God and understanding His will and works. As we begin to consider God, as He reveals Himself to us, the first and most obvious attribute that gives us insight to His goodness is the *unity* and *concord* which exist between the Persons of the Godhead.

The triune God of Scripture is one God in three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Each is fully God, yet each is distinct from and complementary with the others. The Father is neither the Son nor the Spirit; the Son is neither the Father nor the Spirit; and the Spirit is neither the Father nor the Son. Yet each is fully and truly God, and as such, these three eternal Persons exist, and have always existed in a perfect state of unity and concord. As individual Persons in the one Godhead, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit each have their unique attributes and functions; yet together they enjoy perfect unity of being and purpose, without competition, suspicion, jealousy, or fear.

We do not have to reflect too deeply on other world religions to understand how truly unique the God of Scripture is. In Greek and Roman mythology, for example, the various deities that shared residence on Mt. Olympus dwelled together in a condition of mutual suspicion. Jealousies, contrivances, plots, and schemes of various sorts against one or another of their cohort were merely *de rigneur* for the gods and their human collaborators. Similarly, in other religions, contests and struggles between the gods explain the origins of earth and man, and the various tumults that beset the earth and its peoples.

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People everywhere recognize the value of unity and concord. We are happiest when we're not arguing or fighting with one another, when others' borders and privileges are honored, and when we are free from the fear of invasion or violence. Peace is good, in our souls, marriages, homes, communities, nations, and times. And this desire for peace, unity, and concord derives from our knowledge of God, whether unacknowledged or treasured, remote or refined. For the eternal God of Scripture exists in perfect peace within Himself; and His will for the inhabitants of earth is that they might share in His peace by knowing Him, embracing the Prince of Peace, and doing those things which make for peace on earth as it is in heaven.

God is the God of peace, and peace – unity and concord – is definitely good.

Called to peace

God's intention is that people should live together in perfect peace, thus reflecting His being and will in their relations with one another. When people live in unity and concord, individuals flourish, generosity prevails, kindness and considerateness are the norm, and jealousy, striving, and competition are restrained. The first Christians startled, then attracted, their unbelieving neighbors by the unity and concord they demonstrated in their lives together (cf. Acts 4.32-37; 6.1-7). When people know peace in their soul and with God, they can practice unity and concord with others, and thus extend a measure of God-likeness to their neighbors.

It is good for brethren to dwell together in unity, the psalmist reminds us (Ps. 133.1), and this is because such unity refracts the being and will of God into the human condition, and creates a context in which the rich and varied possibilities for human flourishing can take root and bloom.

Peace is Jesus' gift to His followers (Jn. 14.27) – peace with God, peace among themselves, and peace that surpasses all understanding, even in the face of anxious and troubling conditions (Rom. 5.1; Eph. 4.3; Phil. 4.6, 7). Christians are called to pursue whatever works for peace (Rom. 14.19), because living together in unity and concord is a very good thing, a realization of heaven's reality within the vicissitudes and uncertainties of our temporal existence.

God is good, and the goodness of God may be discerned, in the first instance, in the unity and concord He enjoys within Himself.

For reflection

1. Do you agree that peace is a desirable condition? How is it evident that almost everyone agrees with this?
2. Christians are called to work for peace, beginning in their churches, and then wherever peace is lacking. How is this an example of fulfilling what Jesus taught us to pray in Matthew 6.10?
3. What are some ways that people try, apart from God, to maintain peace in society? What does this longing for peace indicate about their sense of what is good?

Next steps – Conversation: Is peace a good thing? Ask some people in your Personal Mission Field – Christians and non-Christians. Why is peace good? Where does the desire for peace come from in the human heart?

3 Holiness

*“Holy, holy, holy,
Lord God Almighty,
Who was and is and is to come!”* Revelation 4.8

Purely holy

The perfect and uninterrupted unity and concord God enjoys in His being, is good, and is only possible because God is pure. He is *wholly* God, *only* God, *always* and *in all ways* God, and *alone* God. In the being of God, and in the relationships binding the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit into one perfect Godhead, a divine purity exists that takes the form of *holiness*. God is holy, and *only God* is holy.

This purity of God – His holiness – is a second expression of what makes God good. God is good because God is pure and holy. If we would be good, we must strive to be holy. God has determined that it is good for us to bring holiness to completion in the fear of God (2 Cor. 7.1). When we are holy, we are pure in our motives, thoughts, desires, priorities, and works. And that holiness expresses the goodness of God, and in fact, God’s goodness coming to light in us.

The living creatures in the heavenly court extol the greatness of God, by singing His threefold holiness. God is holy, holy, holy, and holiness is pure and good.

Beware impurities

In most cases, impurity is not a condition to be desired. Hand me something to eat or drink and mention the word, “impurity,” and I am very likely to decline.

Conversely, to be *pure* is, in general, a good thing. Advertisers know this. A well-known brand of soap used to market itself as “99 and 44 100% pure.” The value of gold and precious gems is determined by the degree of their purity. We install special filters to purify our air and water. We want our steel to be pure and without flaws. We want our foods to be pure and free of fillers, additives, and the like. Just give us pure beets, pure beef, pure beans, and pure beams, thank you.

Try selling a product by boasting of its *impurities*, and you’ll be out of business before you start. People recognize that purity in consumer goods is a good thing, and impurity, not so much. We want our products to be pure, to be *holy*.

In the realm of morality, however, the notion of purity is apparently not so clear. Moral purity is very often ignored or redefined to suit our own peculiar sense of goodness, as we have seen. We insist that those who supply our food, water, air, and gems make them as pure as possible. But when it comes to our personal purity, our moral conduct, we’re often willing to stretch the definition of purity – or to ignore it altogether – to satisfy our selfish desires. We forsake *holiness* for *me-ness*, and thus goodness goes out the window.

When our morality is not pure, goodness cannot prevail, except, of course, in only the most relative of terms, which is to say, not at all. Our own standards of goodness fail us here, because we are not holy. We are selfish, finite, and inclined to look out for our own interests and wellbeing above all. Our idea of good is itself impure, and this impurity – this want of holiness – pervades all aspects of our lives, all our relationships, roles, and responsibilities.

God is pure. God is holy. All the most noble, edifying, and enduring attributes emanate from that holy purity and point the way to goodness for us. If we want to know what is good, and how to *be* good, we must look

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more carefully at the holiness of God.

The strength of holiness

There is strength in holiness, in purity of motives, aspirations, and actions, and that strength empowers people for good works, like the good works of God Himself.

But when you compromise holiness and purity, good works cannot long endure. If you build a bridge out of impure concrete, buttressed with impure steel, while the bridge may function for a while, it will break down soon enough. Strong bridges need *pure* concrete and *pure* steel, uncompromised by any admixture of anything else.

Like God, in His holiness.

So it is also with people, if they are to live in unity and concord and be good toward one another. If our motives are pure and holy, like the purity and holiness of God, the goodness of God will inform our actions and lead us to those works that edify and bring peace. It is good to be holy, as God is holy, and as His holy and righteous and good Law is holy. In the magnificence of His grace, God sends His *Holy* Spirit to indwell us, and guides us through His *holy Word* so that we might recognize any impurities in our souls and flush them with the goodness of God. God wants us to be holy because to be holy is to be good, like God.

God is holy, and He has made it clear that He considers it good that *we* be holy, too: “For I *am* the LORD your God. You shall therefore consecrate yourselves, and you shall be holy; for I *am* holy (Lev. 11.44).” The goodness of God is evident in His holiness, both as we see it revealed in His Word, and as we know it to worked out in our lives.

If we would be good, and know good, then we must be *holy*, as God is *holy*.

For reflection

1. How would you explain the meaning of holiness?
2. Why is holiness a good thing? What should we think of someone who downplays the importance of holiness?
3. What makes being holy so hard? How do we bring holiness to completion (2 Cor. 7.1)?

Next steps – Conversation: Do your Christian friends think about holiness as a good thing? Ask a few of them. Ask them also how we can help one another to bring holiness to completion in the fear of God.

4 Harmony

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. Genesis 1.1, 2

Glorious harmonies

One of most popular and successful singing groups of the '60s and '70s was the folk trio, *Peter, Paul and Mary*. Their albums sold in the millions. They drew large crowds to concerts all over the world, and performed on college campuses, television programs, and at large outdoor venues.

Mary Travers died in 2009, and Peter Yarrow and Paul Stookey make public appearances only occasionally. But their music is beloved by hundreds of thousands, who delight in their combinations of lyrics, melody, harmonies, and guitar accompaniment. Even today, PBS uses a 50-year commemorative of their career as a primary fundraiser, and their YouTube videos (thanks, Tony Peacock!) are still enjoyed by hundreds of thousands.

One critic described the group as a violin and two cellos. Only a few of their songs were solos – Peter pleading in “Buddy, Can You Spare a Dime,” Paul cavorting in “On a Desert Island,” or Mary lamenting “The Last Thing on My Mind.” And while these and other solo pieces are charming, it’s when the voices are soaring and lilting together that the true goodness of *Peter, Paul and Mary* comes across.

While most of their songs were based on fairly simple folk melodies, their complex and interchanging harmonies make you want to listen again and again, ever more carefully, and with increasing delight – which, according to William Cowper, is a true sign of something beautiful and good.

A single singing voice can be good, but add complementary harmonies that wend around the melody and are passed around by all the singers, and you have a formula for goodness that reflects the goodness of the divine Trinity.

God is harmonious

God is one God in three Persons. But this does not mean the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are the *same* divine Being. The three exist in a bond of unity and concord, characterized by holiness. Each of the Persons has a different function – a different *economic* attribute, as theologians put it. The Father ordains, the Son executes, and the Spirit animates. The Father wills, the Son obeys, and the Spirit accomplishes.

We can see this from the beginning of God’s self-revelation in Scripture. God created everything. The Father decreed the extent and means of creation, the Son (Word) executed the decree of the Father, and the Spirit, hovering like a hen over her chicks, coaxed the creation to life, and sustains it there.

We can see this also in the coming of the Kingdom of God on earth, as it is in heaven: The Father ordained the Kingdom, the Son brought it near and occupies its throne, and the Spirit is the animating power Who brings righteousness, peace, and joy to the world.

At times this harmonious interplay overlaps and conjoins so tightly that we cannot distinguish the work of one Person from another. But never is there any discord between Them, as They sustain the world and all its beauty and goodness, and advance the work of redemption among the children of men.

The harmony that exists among the Persons in the Godhead is a seamless cloth of co-operation and collaboration that brings the glory of God to light in even the most ordinary circumstances and mundane things. The *good* that is God thus comes to light in a *harmony* of shared existence and endeavor, with the glory

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of God and the *good* of His creation as the objective.

Harmony is good

The atonal music movement of the early- and mid-20th century never achieved anything like the following of *Peter, Paul and Mary*. Though the compositions were intellectual and complex, and famous orchestras played or recorded many of these works, atonal composers were never able to convince the listening public that all that dissonance, cacophony, broken rhythm, and motif-less music was good. You probably have a *Peter, Paul and Mary* tune running through your head by now, but I'll bet you can't think of a single John Cage composition, or any movement from any atonal composer.

When our lives achieve harmony, that's a good thing. A marriage where husband and wife work together, share duties and interests, create a home, raise a family, and devote themselves to mutual flourishing is a picture of the harmony of God. So is a workplace where every worker embraces his vocation, respects his co-workers, and strives to help others succeed. The best athletic teams demonstrate a harmony of talents and roles that makes them a delight to watch, even though they may not always win. Architects, painters, choreographers, writers and editors, landscapers, urban designers – all kinds of people and professions recognized that the human soul resonates with things harmonious, disparate objects and themes joined and working together to create a single, overall, *good* effect.

Harmony is good, because harmony in every aspect of life reflects the being of God and the many and varied expressions of His work in time.

For reflection

1. Why do great hymn composers write their hymns in four parts? How does such harmony enhance the goodness of the hymn?
2. How might you tell, walking into a new church on a Sunday morning, whether this was a harmonious congregation?
3. What makes a situation *un*harmonious? Has God called us to bring harmony to the roles, relationships, and responsibilities of our Personal Mission Fields? Explain.

Next steps – Preparation: What opportunities will you have today to bring some harmony into your world?

5 Order

For God is not the author of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints...Let all things be done decently and in order. 1 Corinthians 14.33, 40

Order in the church

Paul was a stickler for having churches properly ordered. He railed at the Corinthians for the chaos and disorder in their worship, and in their practice of the Lord's Supper. He congratulated the Colossians on the good order of their congregational life (Col. 2.5). He insisted that Titus bring order to the churches on Crete by making sure each one had qualified elders in leadership roles (Tit. 1.5).

Paul did not support the idea of spontaneity in worship or church life. How much less would he have supported a lack of order and discipline in the life of a believer? He wanted things to be ordered, and the reason he did was because he knew that God is a God of order, not of confusion. God is no shapeshifter, like the deities of many pagan religions. We can know Him, and observe the unity, concord, holiness, and harmony which are unchanging and unfailing in Him. We can understand His ways, albeit only imperfectly (Eccl. 3.11), and we can order our affairs to line up with the order He sustains throughout His creation.

The foundations of Western art, music, literature, government, business, and science were erected on the assumption that God is a God of order. Order is good, because order enables us to know, understand, and flourish.

As we continue looking to God to help us in understanding the nature of *good*, we must not overlook the fact that God, Who is good, is a God of order. How can we see this?

God's order: vision

We can't say everything there is to be said about the order God exhibits in Himself and His ways, but we can consider three important aspects of this, which can be helpful to us in understanding the meaning of *good*.

First, *vision* is an important aspect of God's order. Before He spoke the first word of creation, God saw in His mind the whole of the cosmos, the whole of its history, and the entirety of what He would do to glorify Himself in this project. God leaves nothing to chance; what He envisions, He performs. What He sees, and what He reports that He sees, and wants us to see, He will most certainly bring to completion.

Wherever God employs vision to lead His people, we should pay close attention, and let the vision of the good life we entertain be shaped and informed by the vision of God. For example, how do we think about the Kingdom of God? Most Christians are aware of the Kingdom, and perhaps have an idea about what it is, or at least, what "Kingdom of God" means. But how many of us have *God's* vision of that Kingdom as the vision that guides us in *seeking* that Kingdom as our first and highest priority? The more our vision for our lives lines-up with whatever God has revealed of His vision, the more consistently our lives will move toward and experience what God defines as good.

God's order: priorities

Second, God expresses His orderliness, and maintains order in the cosmos, according to priorities – first this, then that, and that, and all the rest. God always does the right thing, at the right time, and in the right order. And whenever God expresses a priority for us, we should embrace it and apply it to our peculiar callings and circumstances.

We don't have to guess about the priorities God considers good for us; He has told us plainly. Seek His Kingdom first and always. Pray without ceasing. Let His Word dwell in you richly. Love Him first and your

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neighbor as yourself. And so on. As God's priorities become our priorities, we will know and express more of the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living (Ps. 27.13).

God's order: next steps

Finally, the order of God works *progressively*, not in leaps and bounds. Except, that is, for His original work of creation. While there is progress to note here – first the light, then the water, then land, then creatures, and so on – this work was accomplished during a special season of creativity and a condensed period of time. Normally, God works gradually, unfolding His plans and will, generation by generation, and calling His people to grow from childish ways to maturity by degrees. We see this especially in the patient, progressive way God unfolded His plan and work of redemption through the Old and New Testaments.

God does not expect us to leap tall buildings in a single bound. We are to grow by taking the next steps every day that will see us moving more fully into His good and perfect will for our lives. Line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little, there a little (Is. 28.13). God's order *unfolds* in regular progress, according to His priorities, and toward His vision of the good life.

God holds out a vision of the good life for His people, shows them the priorities they must heed in realizing that good life, then calls them to a long obedience in the same direction (Eugene Peterson), as they make steady progress in His good and perfect will.

Order is good, because God, Who is good, is a God of order.

For reflection

1. What is the alternative to living an orderly life? Why is it better to live orderly?
2. What is God's vision for our salvation? For our lives in His Kingdom? Can you think of some Scriptures that speak directly to these important matters?
3. What are the main priorities that govern your life? How do these line-up with God's priorities?

Next steps – Preparation: Make a list of God's priorities. How do you embrace and follow these each day? How can you improve in bringing more of God's order into your life? Talk with a Christian friend about these questions.

6 Creativity

Then God saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good. Genesis 1.31

God the Creator

The Scriptures are emphatic that the cosmos came into being at the behest of God, and by the power of His Word:

*Let all the earth fear the LORD;
Let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of Him.
For He spoke, and it was done;
He commanded, and it stood fast.* Psalm 33.8, 9

*Let them praise the name of the LORD,
For He commanded and they were created.
He also established them forever and ever;
He made a decree which shall not pass away.* Psalm 148.5

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. John 1.1-3

By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible. Hebrews 11.3

For this they willfully forget: that by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of water and in the water... 2 Peter 3.5

Matter is not eternal. To modify a phrase which the ancient Arian heretics wrongly applied to Christ, “There was when it (the creation) was not.” Matter has a beginning. Time has a beginning. Contrary to the flimsy and condescending argument of Lawrence M. Krauss in his book, *A Universe from Nothing*, and borrowing from Oscar Hammerstein III, “nothing comes from nothing, nothing ever could.”

Even the word used in Genesis 1 and elsewhere to describe God’s work of creating, the Hebrew verb בָּרָא (*bara*), seems to be reserved primarily as a divine prerogative, especially as it relates to God’s original work of creation. In other words, only God can *bara*, and His work of *bara* is a special work, unique to Him, a work of great variety, immensity, complexity, beauty, mystery, intricacy, bounty, and wonder. We should not doubt, knowing this work to be so special, and God to be so infinitely wise and strong, that He could accomplish this work in six evening-and-morning days.

And, at least in the beginning, all this fruit of God’s *bara* was “very good.” God creates, and creating is an aspect of what makes God *good*. Out of His goodness, God created *everything* into *nothing* by the sheer power of His Word.

Creators all

In his book, *Creators*, eminent historian Paul Johnson explains that all human creativity derives from the creating goodness of God. Out of His goodness, God created people in His own image and likeness, very good. That means that all people, made in the image of God, are creators, and that creativity is good. This is true even though all humans have fallen into sin and live in rebellion against God. Merely because we are sinners does not mean we are no longer God’s image-bearers. It simply means that we have chosen to deny or ignore our true nature, preferring instead to define ourselves – and everything else we regard as good –

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according to our own preferences and priorities

So because human beings are God's image-bearers still, they will create, and much that they will create will be *good*.

Creativity and goodness

But not all creativity is good. As we might suppose, creative efforts that make for hostility, promote unrighteousness, sow disharmony, and put things into a state of confusion and disorder are *not* good, because they do not reflect the goodness which God is.

But creativity rightly understood and properly pursued – mirroring the creative goodness of God, and working to bring His goodness to light in the land of the living – such creativity is good, and can be very good, indeed.

The better we understand the workings of creativity, and the more we apply ourselves to the disciplines that engage our creative powers, the more we may expect to know the goodness of the Lord in all our *good* works.

God is good, and in His work of creating, the goodness which *inheres* in God is refracted through temporal and material beings and things. God's creativity signals to us that He considers it a *good* thing that His goodness be extended throughout everything that is. God intends to fill His cosmos with His goodness, which goodness, as we shall see before long, is ultimately to be discerned in the One Who became flesh to declare God to the world (Heb. 1.3), and whom the young ruler rightly referred to as "Good."

And with Whom God is filling His cosmos with *good* (Eph. 4.8-10).

For reflection

1. How would you define creativity? Do you agree that everyone is creative? Explain.
2. How might we be able to tell when some creative effort is good?
3. How should you expect to express the creativity of God in your own life?

Next steps – Conversation: Where in your life do you have opportunities to do something creative? Talk with a Christian friend about this question.

7 Love

He who does not love does not know God, for God is love. 1 John 4.8

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning. James 1.17

An eternal economy of love

In the Godhead, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit enjoy an eternal relationship of love. Each Person is devoted to the Others, seeks Their glory and praise, and submits to Their will. Nothing is lost as They do so; indeed, the bond of love that allows Them to show such mutual deference and devotion leads to the unity, concord, holiness, harmony, and order God enjoys within Himself, and overflows in His work of creation to everything He has made.

God is love, and He loves with such infinite capacity and power that His love never ceases, is never interrupted or exhausted, and ever overflows into His works as a witness to His goodness.

Love like God's, therefore, is good, because it is disinterested, pure, generous, edifying, and unending. Love must not be defined in terms of mere sentiment, for human emotions are too varied and unstable to produce a reliable standard for love. Love defined by the love God enjoys within Himself, and which He shows to all His works, presents a standard for love which we may not entirely understand, but which we can be certain is always and unendingly good.

The high standard of God's love

How great is the love of God? Jesus explained the high standard of God's love when He declared that God's love for His creation led to the sending of the Son to redeem the world from its fallen condition and to restore it to God and His goodness (Jn. 3.16). The love of God displayed in Jesus can be observed along three facets.

First, love *recognizes the worth of the beloved*. The cosmos God created is valuable to Him because it is His (Ps. 24.1) and manifests His goodness and glory (Ps. 19.1-4). God loves the world because He made it, He owns and sustains it, and He intends that it should achieve the full potential for glorifying Him that was His original design (Hab. 2.14; Rev. 21).

Love takes as its focus, therefore, not mere self-interest, or the realization of some emotional state, but the admiration of the beloved, and the desire to see it realize its full and God-given potential. Every creature and person is a work of God. As we see the cosmos and others in this light, we will love as God loves, because we will see in all things a reminder of God, Who made them and Whose they are.

Second, love *embraces self-denial*. It is not possible to devote oneself to the enhancement and edification of others while pursuing a primarily self-interested agenda ("This will be good for me."). Jesus denied certain of His divine prerogatives and powers to become a Man for the salvation of the world (Phil. 2.5-11). In so doing, He showed us that love must be willing to set aside self-interest to achieve a greater good which redounds to the benefit of all.

Third, love *acts sacrificially and for the edification* of the beloved. Jesus' death on the cross was not merely a symbol; it actually accomplished the forgiveness of all those the Father has given to Him. And the Holy Spirit's coming down among us to indwell those who are being saved is so that they might by Him be built-up into Christlikeness, both as individuals and as communities of believers (2 Cor. 3.12-18; Eph. 4.11-16).

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Love thus proceeds according to criteria and toward objectives that refract Jesus Christ in all His various states of existence – eternal Son and Word, Incarnate Savior, risen Lord, exalted King, and returning Victor and Husband of His Bride, the Church.

Jesus is the standard of love, and we are truly loving with love that is good when we love like Jesus does.

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Such love does not come naturally to us. We are naturally self-centered and resolved to satisfy the wants and needs of the self in all we do. Apart from God and His love, all love is a kind of bargain, a give-and-take in which each person who “loves” hopes to gain at least as much for himself as he gives, and gives only as much as is necessary to gratify himself.

This kind of love is unstable and unreliable, even though it may in many ways succeed in accomplishing good ends in people’s lives.

Only the love of God is consistently and unfailingly good. And though such love does not come to us naturally, it *does* come to us *supernaturally*, as we put aside all self-love, learn Jesus and His ways, and are transformed increasingly into His image by the indwelling Spirit of God (Eph. 4.17-24; 2 Cor. 3.12-18).

Love like God’s love, like the love we see in Jesus Christ, is good, because it issues from and results in all the other forms of goodness, and thus fuels an ever-abounding and ever-increasing experience of the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.

For reflection

1. What are some of the key attributes of the love God enjoys within Himself?
2. Why is love based on mere sentiment not a reliable standard for love?
3. How can we grow in our vision of Jesus in all the phases of His existence, so that we increase in love like His?

Next steps – Preparation: Consider the people you see each day, week after week. Can you say that you love them as Jesus does? Can you see ways you might improve in His love toward them?

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Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. Why can we not rely on human definitions of *good*? Can you give an example to illustrate your answer?
2. How would you counsel a new Christian to make study and contemplation of God his primary means of learning what is good in life?
3. What do we learn about the nature of *goodness* by looking at the Trinity?
4. What does it mean to see the goodness of God in the land of the living? Why should Christians desire this?
5. What's the most important lesson you've learned from this study? How are you putting that lesson to work in your life?

For prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Thank you.