

God is Good
A Series on the Character of God: Part 3

What is the definition of the noun “good?” Is it subjectively determined as “something beneficial or desirable?” Or does “good” have some objective or intrinsic meaning? What does the phrase, “God is good” mean?

There are several instances where the Bible says that God is good; however, in most instances as the Psalmists’ exemplify, God is good because of what He does for His covenant people (Ps 73:1; 100:5). Jesus takes exception to this as He rejects the title of “good teacher” which is recorded in three of the gospels:

And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call Me good (**agathos**)? No one is good (**agathos**) except God alone. (Mark 10:18; Luke 18:19; Matt 19:17)

This is revealing for despite all His good works teaching and healing people, Jesus, the incarnate form of God, does not consider Himself good and indicates that only God is good!

Why doesn’t Jesus consider Himself “good?” What does Jesus mean to be “good” and by what standard is He using to determine what is “good”? Answering these questions of Jesus’ perspective helps us understand this aspect of God.

There are several Greek words for the English term “good,” which reflect the many shades of meaning that it has. When Jesus speaks of “no one is good except God,” He uses the Greek term “agathos,” which can be used as a noun or adjective. In the majority of cases, Jesus uses “agathos” with a meaning towards moral goodness in relation to God who is morally perfect.

In only one instance that is repeated elsewhere twice, Jesus uses “agathos” to explicitly state that no one is good except God (Matt 19:17; Mark 10:18; Luke 18:19). Obedience to the Law did not make one good.

And He said to him, “Why are you asking Me about what is good (**agathos**)? There is only One who is good (**agathos**); but if you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.” Then he said to Him, “Which ones?” And Jesus said, “You shall not commit murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honor your father and mother; and You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Matt 19:17-19)

In most cases, Jesus uses “agathos” to value moral behavior and encourage covenant behavior through a contrast to evil (Matt 5:45; 7:17-18; 12:34-35 [Luke 6:45]; Matt 22:10; John 5:29) or in same manner as a rhetorical device (Matt 7:11; Luke 11:13).

But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good (**agathos**), and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. (Matt 5:44-45)

In similar fashion, Jesus uses “agathos” to value the acquisition of God’s moral knowledge (Luke 10:42) and being faithful to God (Matt 25:21-23; Luke 8:8, 15; 19:17).

But the seed in the good soil, these are the ones who have heard the word in an honest and good (**agathos**) heart, and hold it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance. (Luke 8:15)

Jesus teaches human beings that “agathos” goodness is about obedience and the pursuit of moral perfection. By disavowing that He is “agathos,” Jesus indicates that, as a human being, moral perfection includes a morally perfect body incapable of sin which only God has. Paul speaks of this in 1 Corinthians 15:35-50.

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“Agathos” is used as an expression of approval based on meeting or exceeding some standard. For example, the Law served as a standard by which behavior was determined morally good or evil. When Jesus says that God is “agathos,” what standard is He measuring God by? Does this imply that there is a higher standard apart from God?

This philosophical dilemma, known as the Euthyphro Dilemma, has been known for centuries and solved (see the article: Divine Command: The Dilemma at www.Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/9system_ethics/dc1.aspx). However, in consideration of biblical evidence, understanding “agathos” provides some insight to the very nature of God.

In several instances, God makes the imperative, “be holy for I am Holy” (Lev 11:44-45; 19:2; 1 Pet 1:13-25). The term “holy” makes its first appearance when Moses encounters God for the very first time (Ex 3:5).

Through the Mosaic legislation that takes place after the Exodus, God teaches the nation of Israel the meaning of “holy.” It is a term that places an emphasis on God, because it calls to attention the condition something must be in when encountering the realm of God. To be holy, something must be set apart or separated from the profane or unclean (to learn more, see the article: What did sanctification mean in the Old Testament? at www.Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/9Salvation/SanctifyWhatDoesItMeanOT.aspx).

The imperative “be holy for I am holy” has a special significance, because it comes after God reveals that the nation of Israel will be His own possession and intended to be devoted to Himself:

Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words that you shall speak to the sons of Israel.” (Ex 19:5-6)

Thus, the nation of Israel was obligated to be holy. In making the conditional Mosaic Covenant, the nation of Israel learned what sin was and the concept of being holy. Holiness formed the basis of ethical behavior, because it determined what was morally good or evil.

In contrast to the Old Testament, the New Testament rarely mentions that God is holy. With the New Covenant in force, holiness is defined by the presence of the Holy Spirit. For example, Jesus was holy from conception, because He was conceived by the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:35).

Yet the term “holy” retains its Old Testament meaning of setting apart from the profane as a basis of belonging to God. It is in Jesus that a Believer is sanctified and made holy. It is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit that guarantees one’s entrance into the kingdom of God and inheritance as God’s adopted (Eph 1:13-14; 2 Cor 1:21-22: 5:5).

While the Believer’s spirit has been sanctified and made holy, there is still the matter of the “unclean” human body. The Believer is metaphorically the Temple of the living God (1 Cor 3:16; 6:19-20) and should live a life befitting as a holy vessel (1 Thess 4:3-7).

Because God is holy and set apart from sin and anything profane, His absolute moral standard is an expression of His holiness. God’s moral standard is the requirement for a Believer to be consecrated and sanctified.

Herein is how Christian ethics is related to the holiness of God.

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It is uncertain if goodness is a character of God, but it is certainly the expression of His holy nature (Ex 33:19). God is good, not simply because He is good to us, but because His holiness emanates moral perfection, and encountering Him demands moral perfection in both the spiritual and physical sense. Jesus says God is good, because in encountering His realm evil cannot exist. Perhaps it may be more accurate to say that moral goodness is a character of God.

References:

1. Brown C, ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 2, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, (1979).
2. Grudem W, *Systematic Theology*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, (2000).