



God's Paradoxical Nature

A paradox is two true ideas that seem to oppose each other. They aren't opposed to each other --but, it seems like they are. Paradoxes are difficult for small children to understand because small children are what we call *concrete thinkers*; concrete thinking tends to hold us to one idea or the other --either/or thinking.

Here is a paradox: Women and men are the same (God called their name *Adam*); women and men are different. The two statements seem to conflict with each other, but because of their paradoxical nature, they are both true. Women and men are the same, and women and men are different. Here is another paradox: Jesus is God; Jesus is human. That is a theological paradox. It would seem to the concrete thinker that he would have to be one or the other. However, higher level thinkers, which we call *abstract thinkers*, know that it is possible for Jesus to be God and for Jesus to be human. Both ideas are true; they only seem to be in conflict. Without understanding the nature of the paradox, it is difficult to understand the Bible. Life is full of paradoxes, and so, therefore, is the Bible.

Our text today is a paradox:

"Behold the goodness and severity of God" (Romans 11:22).

It is not that we are to look at one or the other, we are to look at both. The Christians at Rome were not to dwell on God's goodness alone, nor his severity alone; they were to think about both of them together. Both are revealed aspects of God's character; both must be acknowledged together if God is to be truly known. God is good, but God also draws a straight line. God is kind and forgiving, but God is also fair and just.

Never, since the time that Paul wrote, has there been more need to belabor this point, for muddle-headedness and confusion, as to the meaning of faith in God, is almost beyond description. People say they believe in God, yet have no idea who it is that they believe in, or what difference their faith should make.

To paint a clear picture of God, we need to clear away the hodgepodge of fantasy that exists about him. What lies at the root of our confusion about God? Where is the starting-point for getting back on track?

These questions have several answers.

First, people have a way of following private religious hunches. How they, personally, feel about a thing will often take precedence over and control their interpretation of scripture --you can count on that. This is precisely the reason that the Christian church is divided into so many small factions.

Second, Modern people tend to think of all religion as being equivalent, and draw their stock of ideas about God from pagan, as well as Christian sources. It is because of this that we need to show people the uniqueness and finality of the Lord Jesus Christ, who is God's final word to mankind.

Third, People have ceased to recognize the realness of their own sinfulness; it is our part to re-introduce the fact in order that people may be open to correction and, therefore, growth in their lives. Preaching to sinless people has always been an exercise in futility.

Fourth, people are in the habit of disassociating the thought of God's goodness from that of his severity. This idea has infected all of Western Protestantism, which tends to reject ideas of divine judgment, and assumes that God's character is really one of indulgent benevolence without severity. This is the rule rather than the exception among people. It is a small idea of God. What would you think of a person who could let anything go by? A few years ago, we had a popular song that hit this problem nicely. The writer said, "When anything goes, everything's gone." Today, people lie "easily" –they cover for those who do lie. Today, if it doesn't work for you, you just offer an "alternative fact."

Yet, modern Christians are hardly ready to give up on their "enlightened" adherence to the doctrine of a celestial Santa Claus, merely because folk suspect this is not the whole story. The idea that there is no more to be said about God than that he is forbearing and kind, and that is it, is as hard to eradicate as redroot and dandelion. Once it has put down roots, Christianity, in the true sense of the word, is simply smothered out.

The substance of Christianity is faith in the forgiveness of sin through the redemptive work of Christ on the cross. However, on the basis of *Santa Claus theology*, **sin is no problem**, and the atonement becomes needless; God's active favor extends no less to those who disregard his commandments than to those who keep them. The idea that God's attitude toward me is affected by my conduct toward him, has no place in the mind of the modern person. Any attempt to revive the doctrine of "the fear of God as the beginning of wisdom," gets labeled as impossibly old-fashioned, even sub-Christian.

Santa-Claus theology carries within itself the seeds of its own collapse, for it cannot cope with the fact of evil. It is no accident that when the "Good-guy-God" came in at the beginning of the last century with a new interpretation of the Bible, that social problems in the world increased. So long as we refuse to take personal responsibility for the ills of humanity by calling them social problems and deal with them as if they can be cured by the government, we can count on failure. So long as government is always going to be the answer and take the blame, we're not going to be the answer, nor take any blame. We cannot always use the government for our "scapegoat." We must have a God who makes demands on us personally, or we are left with a kind of God who means well, but just cannot do much about anything.

Look at the goodness of God. When Biblical writers called God "good," they were thinking in general of all those moral qualities which prompt his people to call him perfect, and in particular of the generosity which moves them to call him merciful, gracious, and loving. When David declared, "As for God, his way is perfect," what he meant was that God's people find, in experience, that God never comes short of the

goodness to which he has laid claim. "His way is perfect; the promise of the Lord proves true; he is a shield for all who take refuge in him" (Psalm 18:30).

However, there is more to be said. Within the cluster of God's perfection there is one in particular to which the term "goodness" points. Exodus 34:6 speaks of him as "abundant in goodness and truth." This is the quality of generosity. Generosity is a disposition to give to others in a way which has no mercenary motive and is not limited by what the person deserves, but goes far beyond it. Generosity says that others should have what they need to make them happy. Not just that they should have what they need to live and keep alive.

Generosity is the center of God's moral perfection. "Abundant in goodness," the word means spontaneously good, overflowing with generosity; it is the meaning of the New Testament word for grace, --"free favor." There is *common grace* and there is *special grace*. Everyone is touched by God's *common grace*, that is, by the sunshine, the rain, the harvest, the grain; however, not all are touched by God's *special grace*. Another way to put it is: God is good to all in some ways; he is good to some in all ways.

Psalm 145 speaks of God's common grace to all people. "The Lord is good to all: and his tender mercies are over all his works... The eyes of all wait upon you; and you give them their meat in due season. You open your hand, satisfying the desire of every living thing." The point is, that since God controls all that happens in his world, every meal, every pleasure, every possession, every bit of sunshine, every night's sleep, every moment of health and safety, everything that sustains and enriches life, is a divine gift.

These generousities are certainly great, but the mercies of God at the natural level, however abundant, are overshadowed by the greater mercies of a spiritual and eternal redemption that results in a meaningful relationship between man and God, and as a consequence, between man and man. That is God's goodness; no matter what else we have, without this we have nothing. There is nothing greater.

But what about God's severity? The word Paul used in Romans 11:22 means "cutting off." The word severe comes from the word sever. It denoted God's decisive withdrawal of his goodness from those who do not want it. If you "don't want it," he "cuts it off." Though he is abundant in goodness and truth, Exodus 34:6 goes on to say, "He will by no means clear the guilty." --that is, the obstinate and impenitent guilty. So Paul said in our text, God is good and God is severe.

The principle is, that behind every display of divine goodness stands the threat of severity in judgment *if* his goodness is refused. If we do not allow God's goodness to draw us to God in gratitude and responsive love, then we have only ourselves to blame if God cuts us off. Is that fair? Of course, it is fair. If God's goodness is not appreciated, then it is severed, --it is cut off. I think that is reasonable.

So Paul told the Christians at Rome that God's goodness is their portion only on a certain condition, "If you continue in his goodness: otherwise you also shall be cut off." God is like us in this respect. No one wants to help someone who does not want or appreciate the help. No one *can help* someone who will

not receive help.

It is the same principle in each case; they who decline to respond to God's goodness by repentance, faith, trust, and "good will" toward him, cannot wonder and complain if sooner or later the tokens of his goodness are withdrawn and the benefits end. However, God is not impatient in his severity, but just the reverse. "The Lord is slow to anger" (Joel 2:13). Throughout history, judgment is recorded as having been postponed. Peter explained to the first century Christians, that the reason the Lord had delayed judgment is that he is "longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish, but that everyone has a chance to repent." -- to "change his or her mind."

The same explanation presumably applies today. Longsuffering is simply an extension of the opportunity to receive God's goodness. It is no wonder that the New Testament stresses that longsuffering is a Christian virtue and duty; it is a truth that is part of the image of God.

Certainly goodness and severity must go together. We must learn to appreciate the goodness of God toward us. We must count our blessings. We must learn not to take natural benefits, endowments, and pleasures for granted. As for spiritual benefits, Calvary is the measure of the goodness of God; lay it to heart. "What shall I render unto the Lord for all his benefits toward me? I will receive the cup of salvation, and call upon the name of the Lord. O Lord, I am your servant, I will pay my vows unto the Lord now" (Psalm 166:12).

Why? Because, what we do not appreciate will, sooner or later, be cut off. God is good and God is severe.