



"The greatest kindness one can render to any man consists in leading him to the truth."

—Thomas Aquinas

18-Mar-16

God's Goodness and Severity

Near the end of his doctrinal exposition to the Christians in Rome, the apostle Paul writes about God's mercy in calling Gentiles into His church while at the same time rejecting His own people Israel—for a while:

For if [God](#) did not spare the natural branches, He may not spare you either. Therefore consider the [goodness](#) and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in His goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off. ([Romans 11:21-22](#))

Paul makes use of a merism in verse 22, "the goodness and the severity of God." A *merism* is a rhetorical device made up of two opposite elements, with the inference of totality. "I looked high and low" means "I looked everywhere." Or, "I put up with that barking dog day and night," means "I put up with that barking dog all the time." The first merism in the Bible, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" ([Genesis 1:1](#)), means that God created everything.

In [Romans 11:22](#), Paul uses opposites: goodness and severity. In doing so, the apostle is saying that God's character runs the gamut from overt compassion to utter harshness. This merism provides us a shorthand guide to God's character: He "put away" the brutal [sin](#) of David ([II Samuel 12:13](#)), while he slew Uzzah on the spot for touching the Ark of the Covenant ([II Samuel 6:7](#)). Before the twins were even born to Rebekah, before they had done good or evil, God elected to [love](#) Jacob and to hate Esau ([Romans 9:11-13](#)).

It is fair to say that this merism, the opposites expressed in God's goodness and His severity, articulate a central, if not *the* pivotal, theme of God's Word—from its beginning to its end. We see these opposites in narrative after narrative in God's Word. We see examples of them historically and prophetically. Here are just six illustrations:

1. The goodness of God toward Noah and his family, that is, His protection of them through that cataclysm that destroyed [the world](#) that then was. Compare [Genesis 8:1](#) with [II Peter 3:5-6](#).
2. The goodness of God as He delivered "righteous Lot" from the cities of the plain, which He promptly burned to ashes. See [II Peter 2:6-7](#).
3. The severity He displayed to Job in order to teach him an important lesson, and the goodness He showed as He ultimately "blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning" ([Job 42:12](#)).
4. The severity He exhibited toward Joseph, a bit of a cocky 17-year-old lad, who basked in his father's favor. He soon found himself a slave in Egypt and after that, a prisoner. [Psalm 105:18](#) tells us that his "feet hurt in his shackles; his neck was in an iron collar" (*Common English Bible*). Relatively soon, however, Joseph had risen as high as he could go in Egyptian society, becoming Pharaoh's vizier.
5. The harshness God has promised to display to His modern-day Israelites for their sins, and the compassion He will quickly show them as He

returns them to their land. [Isaiah 54:7](#) reads: "I abandoned you for one brief moment, but I will bring you back with unlimited compassion" (*God's Word Translation*).

6. The [kindness](#) God demonstrated by healing multitudes of sick with the mere shadow of Peter passing over them ([Acts 5:15-16](#)) opposed to the harshness He showed Ananias and Sapphira, as they fell dead at Peter's feet ([Acts 5:1-10](#)).

Paul takes the occasion of God's magnanimity to the Gentiles to issue a stern warning to us in [Romans 11:22](#): If we do not continue in God's kindness, we, too, will feel the sting of His severity. We dare not take His kindness for granted.

Paul's language in verse 22 echoes that of [Colossians 1:22-23](#), where he tells the Colossian church that [Christ](#) has reconciled them "in the body of His flesh through death." His gracious gift of reconciliation is wonderful! However, there is an important "if" in verse 23: "if indeed you continue in the [faith](#), grounded and steadfast, and are not moved away from the hope of [the gospel](#) which you heard." This is sobering.

[Hebrews 10:38-39](#) illustrates the kindness and severity of God as it pertains to us:

"But my righteous one shall [live by faith](#); and if he shrink back, my soul hath no pleasure in him." Surely we are not going to be men who cower back and are lost, but men who maintain their faith for the salvation of their souls! (J.B. Phillips' paraphrase)

We need to be aware at all times that we are under judgment ([I Peter 4:17](#)). God desires us to continue moving forward in faith to His Kingdom, where we will enjoy the ultimate expression of His goodness toward us. But if "we neglect so great a salvation" ([Hebrews 2:3](#)), we will not escape His severity, designed to shake us to our marrow and move us to [repentance](#).

We would do well to remember the goodness and severity of God as we progress toward this year's [Passover](#).

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[Seeking God's Will \(Part Five\): Goodness](#)

by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

One of the unwritten rules in style is that the writer should not use the same word over and over again. In vernacular English, we do not edit our words as much and we may tend to use useless or meaningless filler expressions. If we use filler expressions, our speech is not refined or discriminating. Words such as 'nice,' 'interesting,' and 'good' are often used as thoughtless phatic communion, sometimes having contradictory meanings. The Hebrew word *tob*, indicating happy, joyful, or pleasant, has the same connotative range as English, while the Greek synonyms provide some different nuances, including "beneficial" in effect, "excellent intrinsically," and "perfect for its purpose." The good tree in Matthew 7 and the faithful servant in the Parable of the Talents were good because they fulfilled their purpose, doing what God designed them to do. Likewise, God has given us many spiritual gifts and expects us to be good stewards of these resources. God alone, at this time, has intrinsic goodness, in which everything is beneficial in every way, even though initially it may not seem that way. In I Timothy 4:4, 'good' refers to a quality which is intrinsically valuable because of its special design. Paul commends works which everyone would consider ethically good and beneficial. Everything God does fits that category, including temporary punishment that brings about ultimate, permanent good. God employs goodness when He shakes us out of complacency and directs us toward repentance. God's goodness is there to take advantage of if we trust Him. We have to learn to be wise in what is good, realizing that goodness goes beyond the keeping of a group of rules, but requires godly discernment.

From the Archives: Featured Article

[Living by Faith and God's Justice](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

Living by faith is not easy in this world—not by any stretch of the imagination. Among the spiritual realities that a faithful Christian must understand is God's sense of justice. John Ritenbaugh uses the instantaneous deaths of Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, to illustrate the differences between His sometimes swift and terrifying—but perfect—justice and our own imperfect judgments.

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