

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine God's communicable attributes.

Dr. Spencer, we finished God's attribute of truthfulness last time. What do you want to look at today?

Dr. Spencer: We're going to continue following the treatment of God's attributes in Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology*, and he treats God's goodness next.

Marc Roby: How does Grudem define God's goodness?

Dr. Spencer: He writes that "The goodness of God means that God is the final standard of good, and that all that God is and does is worthy of approval."¹ And I think it is important for us to remember that Jesus himself said, in Luke 18:19, that "No one is good—except God alone."² Which certainly agrees with the point Grudem makes that God is "the final standard of good". No one but God fully meets the standard that he himself sets.

Marc Roby: This idea that God is the standard of what is good is also a repeat of what we saw with regard to truth; that is, God is the ultimate standard for truth as well.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it is the same idea, and for the same reason. If we say that God is good, the statement implies that we have some standard by which we evaluate what is good and that we have compared God to that standard and have found him to pass the test. But there is no such standard outside of God. In fact, the final statement in Grudem's definition, that "all that God is and does is worthy of approval" could be confusing if we don't allow him to explain what he means by it.

Marc Roby: What does he mean?

Dr. Spencer: I want to let him speak for himself. Remember the first part of his definition says that "God is the final standard of good". And so he wrote that "Here, 'good' can be understood to mean 'worthy of approval,' but we have not answered the question, approval by whom?" He then writes that in an ultimate sense, "we are not free to decide by ourselves what is worthy of approval and what is not. Ultimately, therefore, God's being and actions are perfectly worthy of his own approval. He is therefore the final standard of good."³

We must realize that if we don't accept God's revelation of himself as our standard for what is good, the only other possibility is that we use a human standard, either our own, or someone else's, or a consensus, or whatever.

¹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, pg. 197

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³ Grudem, opt. cit., pg. 197

Marc Roby: That again sounds exactly like what we said regarding both our ultimate standard for truth and our ultimate standard for morality. Which means that if we choose the human standard, we again have the problem that not all human beings will agree.

Dr. Spencer: That is exactly the problem. If you and I disagree about whether or not something is good, how do we determine who is right?

Marc Roby: Well, I think I'll go with my view. ... But, being serious, I think the popular view is that we should just "agree to disagree."

Dr. Spencer: That is the modern way to handle it, yes. And it works if we are talking about something like whether or not the San Francisco Giants should trade Madison Bumgarner. We can disagree about that and there are at least two good reasons why it doesn't matter. First, it isn't that important in the grand scheme of things.

Marc Roby: I'm sure that serious Giants fans will disagree with that statement.

Dr. Spencer: I'm sure they will too, but even they will have to agree that it has no cosmic or eternal significance. And then secondly, I don't think there is any rational and fool-proof way to find out who is right.

But, when it comes to far more serious issues, for example, whether or not abortion should be legal, I don't think that agreeing to disagree is an appropriate response. Some decision has to be made. Now of course, the decision has been made for our country at this point in time, but it is just a legal decision and is not something that is irrevocable.

Marc Roby: Which is why there was so much furor over the recent confirmation of Judge Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court.

Dr. Spencer: Absolutely, it was all about abortion, gay rights and a few other hot topics. So, my point is that when it comes to things like that, as Christians we have no right to think for ourselves because we have made the declaration that Jesus is Lord. God's word must be our standard. It is our standard for morality and it is our standard for what is good in every situation. And the Bible is our standard because God himself is the ultimate standard and the Bible is his infallible revelation to us.

Marc Roby: And, of course, as with truth, God has implanted his image in us, so what the Bible says is good should, in general, resonate with our own idea of what is good.

Dr. Spencer: I agree. But it is very important that you said it should resonate "in general", because it certainly will *not* agree in every instance. Every aspect of our being is still tainted by sin. And it is when we disagree with God's standard that we must recognize that it is *our* view that must change, not God. Whenever I hear someone make a statement like, "My God would never say such and such" or, "My God would never disapprove of such and such" I get very nervous.

Marc Roby: Why is that?

Dr. Spencer: Because very often when someone makes that kind of statement it is not based on a careful analysis of the biblical data, it is based on their own ideas of what God should be like. In other words, they are changing God in their minds to make him conform to their ideas. But, as we discussed in Session 71 with regard to metaphysical truth, God does not need to conform to our ideas of what he should be. He is the Creator and we are the creatures. He alone has the authority and power to define what he should be like and he alone has the authority and power to define what is good. So, when someone says something like, “My God would never say such and such”, if the statement is not based on a careful analysis of the biblical data, it is very likely to be wrong.

Marc Roby: I see your point. But can you give us an example?

Dr. Spencer: Sure, if you say that your God would never lie or cause someone to sin, that’s fine because those statements are based on what God tells us about himself in the Bible. But, if you say, as I’ve heard people say, that your God would never send anyone to hell, or would never condemn homosexuality, then you have a serious problem because neither of those statements agree with what God himself tells us in the Bible. In fact, they are opposed to what God tells us in the Bible.

Marc Roby: Of course, people would usually defend such statements by saying that “God is love”, or something like that.

Dr. Spencer: I agree, that is the common defense of statements like that. And, of course, the Bible does tell us that God is love. But you then need a biblical definition of what love is. A good place to start would be John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

Now think about that for a minute. It means that God’s love was the cause of his sending his eternal Son, the second person of the Trinity, to humble himself and become a man, and then to give himself as a sacrifice for our sins. It also means that it was God’s will for Jesus Christ to be brutally flogged, nailed to a cross and hung up to die. And while he was on the cross, God the Father poured out his wrath upon him as the just punishment for the sins of his chosen people.

Marc Roby: That doesn’t conform very well to any modern idea of love.

Dr. Spencer: No, it doesn’t. But it does conform to God’s perfect idea of what love is, and that’s all that really matters. We have talked over and over about God’s simplicity ...

Marc Roby: The idea that his attributes all work together.

Dr. Spencer: Right. So, in the case of John 3:16 we have to realize that God’s love is a *just* love. By which I mean that his love does not somehow trump his justice. His love for his people, because it must be a just love, does not allow him to simply wink at and excuse their sin, their sins must be paid for, otherwise God would no longer be just. The problem is that we are not capable of atoning for our sins, the required price is too high.

Marc Roby: That reminds me of Psalm 49, where it says that “No man can redeem the life of another or give to God a ransom for him—the ransom for a life is costly, no payment is ever enough—that he should live on forever and not see decay.” (Psalm 49:7-9)

Dr. Spencer: And, of course, when the psalmist says that “no payment is ever enough”, he is speaking about payments that could be made by mortals like us. But, praise God, in his infinite wisdom and love he devised a plan to redeem the people he loves. And that plan required his eternal Son to become incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth, and then give his life as an atoning sacrifice to pay for the sins of his chosen people. Jesus Christ himself told us in Mark 10:45 that “the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” And in Romans 3:25-26 the apostle Paul tells us that “God presented him [referring to Christ] as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.”

Marc Roby: That truly is an amazing passage to demonstrate God’s justice, love and wisdom all working together. He sent Jesus Christ to pay for our sins so that, as Paul says, he can “be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.”

Dr. Spencer: It is one of the most wonderful examples of God’s simplicity. His plan allows him to “be just”, as Paul puts it, because justice is satisfied. Our sins are paid for. And yet, his plan also allows him to justify those who have faith in Jesus, which means that he declares us to be legally just because our penalty has been paid by another. And so, in that context, John 3:16 makes perfect sense, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

Marc Roby: And praise God for his amazing, wise and just love.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, we absolutely must praise him. And this is the core of the gospel message. There is a legal transaction taking place, or you could think of it as an accounting transaction. It is often called the double transaction, or the double imputation. Our faith unites us with Jesus Christ so that God puts our sins into Christ’s account and then places Christ’s perfect righteousness into our account. As a result, when Christ died on the cross, our sins were paid for. And, even more, when God looks at us, he sees the perfect righteousness of Christ.

This whole transaction is described by the apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:21, which says that “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

Marc Roby: That is indescribable grace and mercy shown to us.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it is. And it is *good*. Getting back to our discussion of the goodness of God, the whole plan of salvation, like everything else God is or does, is good. People may not like it, they may find the idea of a sacrifice of atonement to be offensive, but it *is* good! We need to adjust our thinking to agree with God, not the other way around. In Isaiah 55:8 we read, “‘For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,’ declares the LORD.”

Marc Roby: I think there is a question that we should address in relation to this idea that God defines what is good and then, based on that definition, we say that God himself is good. There is a circularity to that reasoning that will disturb many people.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, there is. We noted the same kind of circularity in Session 71 when we discussed God's truthfulness, and we looked at it in more depth way back in Session 4 where I argued that circular reasoning is inescapable when you're dealing with the ultimate standard for truth.

John Frame points out the same thing in his book *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*. In discussing defending the Christian worldview he writes that "no system can avoid circularity, because all systems ... – non-Christian as well as Christian – are based on presuppositions that control their epistemologies, argumentation, and use of evidence. Thus a rationalist can prove the primacy of reason only by using a rational argument."⁴

Marc Roby: That is a clear presentation of the problem. Ultimate standards can only be defended by referring to themselves.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. But Frame goes further. He notes that "Circularity in a system is properly justified *only* at one point: in an argument for the *ultimate* criterion of the system."⁵ And he then goes on to argue that using a circular argument to defend your ultimate standard in no way commits you to allowing circular arguments to be used at other points.

Marc Roby: That is an important observation.

Dr. Spencer: It is. And he also deals specifically with the circularity in the argument for God being good in his book *The Doctrine of God*. He begins by noting that the problem exists for many of God's attributes. And he then writes that "When we ascribe an attribute to God and also make him the standard for identifying and evaluating that quality, the two statements generate a kind of circularity."⁶ But, as we just noted, this problem exists for all ultimate standards.

Then, in reference to God's goodness in particular, he writes that "We believe that God is good, then, because God tells us that he is good. So the circularity is present. But it is a broad circularity, not a narrow one. It is a circularity loaded with content, full of evidence, and richly persuasive. We are literally surrounded by evidence of God's goodness."⁷

Marc Roby: I like that statement. And it reminds me of what Grudem said about God's truthfulness, that God "has implanted in our minds a reflection of his own idea of what the true God must be, and this enables us to recognize him as God." It seems that Frame is arguing something similar here. God has created us with a sense of what is good so that when we look at all that God is and has done, we recognize it as good.

⁴ John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, P&R Publishing Company, 1987, pg. 130

⁵ Ibid

⁶ John Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, P&R Publishing Company, 2002, pg. 405

⁷ Ibid, pg. 409

Dr. Spencer: I think that is exactly what Frame is getting at. But, of course, we need the proper perspective, meaning a biblical perspective, in dealing with some of the things that God has done. For example, you need the right perspective to see that it was good for God to allow sin and the suffering it brings to enter into his creation.

It has been argued that the existence of sin and suffering prove that God must either not be good, or not able to prevent evil, in other words, not be omnipotent. But that argument assumes an unbiblical idea that the purpose of creation should be to maximize our pleasure in this life.

Marc Roby: Can you explain how a biblical perspective helps to reconcile God's goodness and omnipotence with the presence of sin and suffering?

Dr. Spencer: The biblical perspective provides two key pieces of information to help understand how the presence of sin and suffering can be good. The first thing you need to understand is that human beings are made for eternity. When you take an eternal perspective, you realize that if you endure painful trials for 100 years, it is of no great consequence after you been in heaven for 10,000 years, let alone an eternity.

Marc Roby: That's a very hard thing for us to grasp. What is the second key thing you need to know?

Dr. Spencer: That God's ultimate purpose in creation is the manifestation of his own glory. We discussed this in Session 67 in relation to God's wisdom, but it is absolutely critical here. Allowing sin into this world allows God to display his own judgment, mercy, justice and love to a fuller degree than would have been possible otherwise. In other words, God allowed sin into his creation for his greater glory. So, when you put that together with an eternal perspective, it helps to resolve the apparent contradiction between God being good and omnipotent and yet allowing sin into his creation.

Marc Roby: That perspective certainly helps. But we are out of time for today. So I'd like to remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org. We would appreciate hearing from you.