

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

Dr. Spencer, we saw the goodness of God in providing us with Jesus Christ as our Redeemer in our previous session. What more do you want to say about God's goodness?

Dr. Spencer: I want to look at God's mercy, grace and patience. These three things are sometimes presented as separate attributes and sometimes as aspects of God's goodness, which is how Wayne Grudem does it in his *Systematic Theology*, and I want to follow that plan as well.

Marc Roby: God's mercy, grace and patience are a wonderful topic. And it makes me think of God's response when Moses asked to see his glory. In Exodus 33:19 God said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion."¹

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that is a great passage. And the fact that God will have mercy on whom he chooses, which certainly implies that he doesn't show mercy to everyone, clues us in to the important fact that mercy, grace and patience are not something we, as God's creatures, deserve. They are all examples of God treating us in a way that we don't deserve. They are closely related aspects of God's goodness, and notice that God first said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you".

Marc Roby: How does Grudem define these terms?

Dr. Spencer: Grudem says that "God's *mercy* means God's goodness toward those in misery and distress. God's *grace* means God's goodness toward those who deserve only punishment. [and] God's *patience* means God's goodness in withholding of punishment toward those who sin over a period of time."²

If we look at the definition he gives for God's grace, that it is "God's goodness toward those who deserve only punishment", we see that God's mercy and patience are both gracious acts of God as well. After all, if God's mercy is his goodness shown to those in misery and distress, we have to ask, "Why are they in misery and distress?"

Marc Roby: And the answer is that they are in misery and distress because of sin. Sin is the cause of all misery and distress in this life.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. And then we must ask, "Whose fault is it that men sin, is that God's fault or man's fault?"

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² Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, pp 200-201

Marc Roby: And the answer to that would be that it is man's fault. It certainly isn't God's fault.

Dr. Spencer: You're right again. So, if misery is our fault, and God's mercy is his showing goodness to us in our misery, it is certainly a gracious act. We deserve punishment for our sin, but God helps us in our resulting misery instead.

Marc Roby: I see your point. God's mercy is certainly gracious.

Dr. Spencer: And so is his patience. Using Grudem's definition, God's patience is his "goodness in withholding of punishment toward those who sin over a period of time." But clearly, sinning deserves punishment and so it is gracious of God to be patient. God himself emphasized his gracious nature in his self-disclosure to Moses. In the verse from Exodus 33 that you read a couple of minutes ago God emphasized his gracious nature and he went on to do so even more. He told Moses to chisel out a couple of stone tablets and come up on Mt. Sinai to meet with him.

Marc Roby: We should point out for those who don't remember the history that these stone tablets were the ones on which God wrote the Ten Commandments. They were needed to replace the original ones that had been given to Moses, which he had thrown down and smashed in anger at the sin of the people, who were worshipping a golden calf.

Dr. Spencer: And the fact that God was willing to give the law again, after the terrible sins of his people, is a great demonstration of his mercy and grace. A.W. Pink took note of this fact and wrote that "The *particular character* in which Jehovah was about to reveal Himself to Moses is best perceived by noting the place and circumstances of this gracious manifestation of Himself. It was upon Sinai, in connection with the giving of the Law."³ God's law is a revelation of God's character and a guide for his people. The fact that he would do this after their horrible apostasy is an amazing demonstration of his mercy, grace and patience.

Marc Roby: He would certainly have been justified in simply destroying them all.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, he would have been fully justified. But let's move on with what happened. Moses chiseled out the tablets and went up on Mt. Sinai to meet with God. And in the next Chapter, Exodus 34, we read of God's fulfilling his promise to show Moses his goodness. In Verses 5 and 6 we read, "Then the LORD came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the LORD. And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, 'The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness'". Now we'll get to the rest of what God said in a moment, but for now let's take a look at this opening statement. It begins with God saying "The LORD, the LORD". And the word LORD there is in all capital letters in our English Bibles.

Marc Roby: Which means that the Hebrew word is the tetragrammaton, the holy covenant name of God. Usually represented in English as Jehovah, or Yahweh.

Dr. Spencer: Exactly. We discussed this name in Session 6. It comes from the Hebrew word that means "to be" and if spoken by God could be translated as "I Am". This name emphasizes God's

³ A.W. Pink, *Gleanings in Exodus*, Moody Press, 1981, pg. 350

self-existence – he is the only one who can say “I Am”. All other beings are dependent on him. But it is also the covenant name by which God revealed himself to Moses, so it speaks of his being the covenant Lord of his people. In any event, after repeating this covenant name twice for emphasis, the first thing God says about himself is that he is “the compassionate and gracious God”, or at least that is how our NIV renders it. Other translations use the word mercy instead of compassion. For example, the ESV says “a God merciful and gracious”. According to Vine’s expository dictionary, the root Hebrew verb means “to have compassion, be merciful, [or] pity.”⁴

Marc Roby: That’s very interesting. When Moses asked to see God’s glory, the response he got, as we saw earlier, was this, “I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you” (Ex 33:19), and then in that revelation God says that he is merciful and gracious. It certainly looks as though the Bible would agree that mercy and grace are aspects of God’s goodness.

Dr. Spencer: I think it would. And the very next thing God said was that he is “slow to anger”, which is another way of saying patient. So it would be reasonable to conclude that the biblical teaching is that mercy, grace and patience are aspects of God’s goodness. Then Verse 6 ends by saying that God is “abounding in love and faithfulness”. The Hebrew word translated as love here is *hesed*, which is a very important word in the Old Testament. It refers primarily to God’s covenant love for his people. According to Vine’s it can be translated at various times as “loving-kindness; steadfast love; grace; mercy; faithfulness; goodness; [and] devotion”.⁵

The overall message is quite clear. When God showed his goodness to Moses, he showed him his gracious, merciful, patient, faithful and devoted love. God then finishes the sentence by saying “maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.” And the “thousands” here is probably thousands of generations, as in Exodus 20:6. The emphasis is again on God’s faithfulness. And then the sentence ends by mentioning the extremely important fact that God is forgiving.

Marc Roby: What a wonderful self-revelation by God.

Dr. Spencer: It is very wonderful. But I would be remiss if I didn’t also read the rest of the verse. Verse 7 goes on with another sentence. God says about himself, “Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.”

Marc Roby: I’m afraid that most people would not consider that good.

Dr. Spencer: I’m pretty sure that you’re right about that. But we have to remember that God defines what is good, not us. And we also need to be careful to understand what is meant by God punishing. It could be that the punishing here primarily refers to God’s punishment of

⁴ Vine, W.E., Merrill F. Unger, William White, Jr., *Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, Thomas Nelson, 1996, pg. 43

⁵ *Ibid*, pg. 142

unrepentant sinners, which is what John Calvin thought.⁶ That would certainly be good because it would comport with God's justice. Or, it could be that this includes God's punishing his people, in which case it is referring to his disciplining us in love, for our good, as a father disciplines his children, as we read in Hebrews 12:10, which says, "Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness."

Marc Roby: You also mentioned that in Session 75, that suffering can produce good fruit in this life.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it can. It keeps us humble, it causes us to look to God and pray, it makes us more capable of comforting others, it drives out sin, it helps us to fix our eyes on Jesus and our heavenly home, and that is just a partial list of its benefits. A life of uninterrupted pleasure is not the best life. God loves us too much, and is too good, to allow that for his children.

Marc Roby: It's interesting to note that these verses from Exodus 34 are quoted in part at least seven times in the Old Testament.⁷ For example, in Psalm 103:8 it says, "The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love." And, in Joel 2:13, the prophet says, "Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity."

Dr. Spencer: Yes, these verses are quoted that many times because God's goodness is so important. But we must also remember the warning that "he does not leave the guilty unpunished". I think the primary reason that is mentioned here, including the fact that our children and grandchildren will reap the bitter fruit of our sins, is to prevent us from presuming upon God's love. Far too many professing Christians today seem to think that personal holiness is an old-fashioned Puritan idea and is not important at all. But the Bible is very clear, as we are told in Hebrews 12:14, that "without holiness no one will see the Lord." And it is absolutely impossible, given all that the Bible teaches on this subject, to interpret that as referring solely to the imputed righteousness of Christ.

Marc Roby: We must remember the simplicity of God again. We can't think of any of his attributes in isolation. Therefore, his goodness to us, in terms of his mercy, grace, patience and forgiveness, must be considered in the light of his holiness and justice.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, they absolutely must be. The great Puritan John Owen wrote that "There is no imagination wherewith man is besotted more foolish, none so pernicious, as this, that persons not purified, not sanctified, not made holy, in this life, should afterwards be taken into that state of blessedness which consists in the enjoyment of God."⁸ And Joel Beeke and Mark Jones wrote

⁶ Calvin, John, *The Four Last Books of Moses, In the Form of a Harmony*, in Calvin's Commentaries, Vol. III, Baker Books, 2009, pg. 387

⁷ See also Nu 14:18, Ne 9:17, Ps 86:15, 145:8 and Jonah 4:2

⁸ quoted in Joel R. Beeke & Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life*, Reformation Heritage Books, 2012, pg. 528

that “If God is so concerned about holiness, and we have such need of it, then, dear friends, you will not feel at home in a holy heaven if you did not strive for holiness on earth.”⁹

Marc Roby: Those are serious warnings.

Dr. Spencer: They are very serious, but they are also necessary. Many modern Christians seem to think that they can be totally absorbed with this world, completely in love with its pleasures, and completely indifferent to the promises and demands of the Bible, and yet be saved. But the apostle John tells us, in 1 John 2:15, “Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.” Now John is not telling us that we are not allowed to enjoy the legitimate pleasures that God gives us in this life, that is not at all his point. But if earthly pleasure is what you treasure most, if there is no desire in your heart to be free from sin, to please God in this life and to see God face to face, you are not born again.

Marc Roby: That is, again, a very serious warning.

Dr. Spencer: And I think the seriousness of our sin problem is part of why we are told in Exodus 34:7 that God “punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.” However you interpret that verse, it is certainly a fact that my sin affects my children, grandchildren and so on.

If a man is a drunk, that definitely affects his family. If a man commits a crime and goes to jail, that definitely affects his family. And even if you take something much less drastic and look at a man who is lazy and uninvolved in raising his children and managing his home, that affects his family. This is an indisputable fact. And it should cause us all to be far more careful with how we live our lives. Our sin affects those we love.

Marc Roby: And we should appreciate God’s goodness. His calling us up to holy living is really nothing more than calling us up to do what is best for ourselves and those whom we love.

Dr. Spencer: Exactly. And when we fail, and we all do in many ways, we can come to God in repentance and faith, and he is merciful, gracious and patient in his dealing with us. We must not presume upon his mercy, but it is still a great comfort. Our God is good.

Marc Roby: Are we done now with God’s goodness?

Dr. Spencer: Well, there is one more aspect of God’s goodness that we have yet to look at, and that is God’s love. This is also sometimes treated as a separate attribute, as Grudem does, but it doesn’t really matter whether we consider it as a separate attribute or not, in either case we need to spend some time looking at it.

It is interesting to notice that the Westminster Shorter Catechism mentions God’s goodness, but not his love, in its definition of God. Question 4 asks, “What is God?” And the answer is, “God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice,

⁹ Ibid, pg. 535

goodness, and truth.” I haven’t looked into this, but I assume that the Westminster divines were including love under the rubric of God’s goodness.

Marc Roby: Alright, how do you want to proceed with examining God’s love?

Dr. Spencer: Well, first of all, I need to say that I can’t imagine a more appropriate topic for this time of year. The greatest expression of God’s love by far is his sending his own eternal Son to become incarnate and to be an atoning sacrifice to redeem his chosen people. Grudem defines God’s attribute of love this way; “God’s love means that God eternally gives of himself to others.”

Marc Roby: And God has given more than we can imagine. One of the most famous verses in the Bible of course is John 3:16, where we read, “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.”

Dr. Spencer: That is an amazing statement. And people often forget that it begins with the word “for”, which implies it has something to do with explaining the verses that comes before it. In this case, Christ had been telling Nicodemus that a person has to be born again to enter the kingdom of heaven. He concluded, in Verses 14 and 15, by saying, “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.” So, John 3:16 is explaining why everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

Marc Roby: And that is a wonderful message for Christmas, which is good, because we are out of time for today and we can look at that next time, which is our last session before Christmas. Let me remind our listeners that they can send their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org, and we will do our best to respond.