

GOD IS GOOD BUT ALSO SEVERE!

Today's Text: Romans 11: 17- 25

Extracts:

Do not boast against the branches. But if you do boast, remember that you do not support the root, but the root supports you.... *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 will also be cut off* [Rom. 11: 18-22]

Nathalie Blanchard worked with IBM in Bromont, Quebec, Canada.¹ She was diagnosed with major depression. So, her employer placed her on a long leave with full sick leave benefits, paid monthly. She had enjoyed the benefits for a year when one agent of her company's medical insurance providers, Manulife, discovered photos of Blanchard on her Facebook at a bar show, at her birthday party and on vacation- clear evidence that she was no longer depressed. So, her benefits dried up. She claimed that she did all that on her doctor's advice to reduce depression. But, as far as her employer was concerned, she was no longer fit to enjoy her sick leave benefits. Blanchard estimated that she had lost thousands of dollars in benefits since Manulife changed her claim

IBM was good to Blanchard by placing her on a long-term sick leave benefits. However, the moment the company was able to establish that she no longer qualified for them, they cut her off. IBM was good but also severe. So it is with God. In bubbling Christian circles, you hear the expression, "God is good all the time; all the time, God is good!" The impression you get is that in all circumstances, God only dispenses good things. Is He not also the God of justice? Are we not taking Him for granted to think that we can get away with anything and everything because God is good? If an insurance company could find out about Blanchard's escapades from Facebook, why do you think God who sees everything cannot find out about your secret sins? In this week's Bible verses, Paul tells us that God is good alright- but also severe. He is good to those who fear and obey Him but metes out strict justice to those who disobey Him. It is better to ALWAYS be on His good side! That is what we hope to find out from this week's study.

¹ Story is based on: "Woman loses benefits over Facebook pics," *The Associated Press*, Sun., Nov. 22, 2009; http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/34089972/ns/world_news-weird_news/?GT1=43001

1. Background: The concept of God's goodness

A rich young ruler once knelt before Jesus and asked Him, "Good Teacher, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?" Jesus replied him, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God" [Mk 10: 17-18]. At one level, we can see that response from the perspective of Jesus speaking as a man, not as the Son of God. However, for the purpose of this week's study, the answer suggests that ***God does not see goodness as humans do.***

The word of God says that God's thoughts towards us (using the children of Israel in exile in Babylon as His point of reference) are thoughts of peace and not of evil, ***to give us a future and a hope [Jer. 29: 11]***. That suggests that ***good from God's perspective is measured at the end of the process; it is an outcome.*** However, from ***our (human) perspective, good is measured more in actions or short-term outcomes or milestones on the way to the anticipated or unknowable future outcome.*** For humans, ***we want both the process and outcome to be pleasurable and satisfying for us to call it good.*** We prefer the easiest and fastest outcomes with the highest or best payoffs. If we then encounter unpleasant or painful bumps on the way, leading to sweat, hardship or persecution, then it is no longer good! Yet, the word of God says that, if you want to enter life, "enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction [but] narrow is the gate and ***difficult is the way which leads to life;*** and there are few who find it" [Matt. 7: 13-14]. ***Therefore, for God to do what is good for us, He will have to sometimes be severe on us to make sure that we remain on course.*** That is our focus in this week's study.

In the Bible verses for our study, Paul draws our attention to the "goodness and severity of God; on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in His goodness. Otherwise, you will also be cut off" [Rom. 11: 22]. Here is the logic behind Paul's thesis:

a) *The children of Israel were cut off from the salvation tree*

Using the analogy of the olive tree, Paul made the point that, "because of unbelief [the children of Israel] were broken off" [v. 20]. As the seed of Abraham, they had the privilege to be part of the reign of Jesse's offspring, "a Rod from the stem of Jesse, and a Branch ... out of his roots" on whom rested the Spirit of the LORD, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD" [Is. 11: 1-2]. We know that those seven Spirits of God are on the Lamb of God, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David [Rev. 5: 5-6]. That is, Jesus the Christ!

So, on the basis of the goodness of God that was given to the children of Israel as a privilege, it was theirs for as long as they accepted Jesus as the only begotten Son of God and put their faith in Him. ***They were the true***

branches of the olive tree. But, when some of them refused to accept Jesus as their Lord and Saviour, they were cut off. That is a severe treatment which every disobedient person will receive from God. His goodness must be tempered with justice.

b) *But Gentiles were grafted in*

Paul writes concerning the Gentiles, “If some of the branches, and you being a wild olive tree, were grafted in among them, and with them became a partaker of the root and fatness of the olive tree, do not boast against the branches. But if you boast, remember that you do not support the root, but the root supports you” [**Rom. 11: 17-18**].

What applies to erring children of Israel applies to privileged Gentiles. In other words, the branches from the wild olive tree that have now been grafted into the true olive tree must take vitality from the root of the true olive tree. Otherwise, they will equally dry up and die. God will be good to you if you believe in and fear Him. To do so is to accept His only begotten Son. Otherwise, God’s justice will take over.

Remember the Parable of the Wedding Feast where one king organized a wedding for his son. He sent his servants to bring in those who had been invited but they gave one excuse or another for their absence. The king was angry and so he commanded his servants to go out into the highways and bring in “all whom they found, both bad and good.” The wedding hall soon filled up. However, as the king looked around, he saw a man who did not have on a wedding garment. They cast him out [**Matt. 22: 1-14**]. In like manner, the Gentiles had to meet the same standards of faith demanded of the children of Israel. *God is not partial* [**Acts 10: 34**]. *His goodness ends where His justice begins!*

c) *The bottom line was faith in Jesus*

Paul concludes, “And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written, “The Deliverer will come out of Zion; and He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob; for this is My covenant with them, when I take away their sins”” [**Rom. 11: 26-27**]. The Deliverer is Jesus [**Jn 1: 29**] to whom the Father has given the right to judge the world. Therefore, s(he) who does not honour the Son does not honour the Father who sent Him [**Jn 5: 22-23**]. S(he) who believes in Him is not condemned; but s(he) who does not believe is condemned already, because s(he) has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God [**Jn 3: 18**].

From the foregoing analysis, we can conclude that *God’s goodness and severity rest on His justice.* God is not a man that He should lie or be partial. *He deals with us according to our choices. If we obey Him, He remains good to us.* We

call such blessings. *But if we do not obey, He chastises us as an earthly father chastises the child he loves* [Heb. 12: 5-6]. For the repentant, that means correction; but to the rebellious, that is punishment. Whether you call it correction or punishment, it can be unpleasant and severe because “no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful” [v. 11]! *Therefore, God is good all the time but also strict and severe all the time.*

2. Why we tend to underrate God’s severity

All in the name of grace, believers tend to take God for granted. Here are some of the more specific reasons, among others:

a) *The sun shines on both the good and the bad!*

At the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught His listeners that God “makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” [Matt. 6: 45]. In other words, God has given us a kind of general amnesty when it comes to the basic necessities of life. For example, can you imagine what could happen if God were to distribute the air we all breathe on the basis of righteousness? What if it were to rain only on the farmlands of believers as happened during the plagues on Egypt? For example, on one occasion, “all the livestock of Egypt died; but of the livestock of the children of Israel, not one died” [Ex. 9: 6]. So, God has been quite lenient to unrepentant sinners and lax believers who now interpret such kindness as God’s goodness, no matter what they do.

Another possible reason that God shows such mercy to sinners is that He can use anyone for His purposes. For example, how many people do you know would willingly run to Jesus if not because of unending whipping from Satan and his wicked forces? Of the arrogant emperor of Assyria, God said, “Woe to Assyria, the rod of My anger and the staff in whose hand is My indignation. *I will send him against an ungodly nation, and against the people of My wrath.* I will give him charge, to seize the spoil, to take the prey, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets” [Is. 10: 5-6]. Balaam was a soothsayer, a diviner or sorcerer [Num. 24: 1; Josh. 13: 22]. Yet, God used him to deliver the children of Israel from the hands of Balak [Num. 22: 31-38]. When God was going to use Cyrus, the Assyrian emperor to bring the children of Israel back home after their seventy-year exile in Babylon, God called him His anointed whose right hand He had held. He opened for him “treasures of darkness and hidden riches of secret places.” God said to him, “*I have named you, though you have not known Me*” [Is. 45: 1-4].

So, it is possible that you are still at the transition stage of your life. God is moving you closer and closer to Himself. He will protect you from harm even when you are still living dangerously. He knows where you will meet

Him and you are going to be a divine instrument for good in the world in the future. That was how Paul moved- from a blasphemer (even though in ignorance) to the most prolific apostle of Christ [**1 Tim. 1: 13**]. But do not get carried away by it because we all cannot get that lucky! Do not get crushed before you have the chance to kneel at the foot of the cross.

b) *God is longsuffering*

God is “longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” [**2 Pet. 3: 9**]. For example, my maternal grandfather died at the age of 120 years but he received Christ only a few days to his death! Indeed, with the Lord, a thousand years are as one day [**v. 8**].

In the words of Jesus, “This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come” [**Matt. 24: 14**]. There is hardly any part of the world today that has no access to the Internet. Even where state authorities try to restrict access, they have not been able to prevent the gospel from those that God wants to call. For example, the greatest threat to Islam may not be Christian missionaries from Europe and America or global television networks, such as *TBN* or *EWTN*, but individual Muslims that have come into direct contact with *Isa* (Jesus) the son of Miriam whose miracles are well documented in the *Qur’an*. Some of such ex- Muslims are quietly exporting Christian missionaries to large Muslim communities in other parts of the world.²

We can see God’s mercy in the cases we have examined above but we should not get carried away and continue to underrate God’s severity. What of the case of people who refuse to admit or confess their sins? Such people want to continue to enjoy God’s free air or the power of knowing Christ. Yet, they have refused to advance in faith beyond its mere profession. They want to be given grace to get away with unconfessed sin! Unfortunately for such people, God’s justice and impartiality will not let Him set you scot-free! Do not be deceived for God cannot be mocked. As a person sows, so s(he) shall reap [**Gal. 6: 7**].

Enjoyment (pleasure) is not the same thing as joy (contentment)?³ Did the word of God not say that those who want to live godly in Christ shall face persecution [**2 Tim. 3: 12**]? Is persecution not painful? Is chastisement pleasurable? Indeed, many are the afflictions of the righteous but the Lord delivers them out of them all and those who hate the righteous, God condemns [**Ps. 34: 19-20**]. The righteous

² See, for example, Bilquis Sheikh’s *I dared to call Him Father* <http://www.newtestamentpattern.net/bookreviews/biography-modern/idaredtocallhimfather.htm> and Gulshan Esther’s *The Torn Veil*; <http://www.southasianconnection.com/articles/280/1/The-Torn-Veil---The-True-Story-of-Esther-Gulshan-Fatima/Page1.html>

³ “Are you looking for joy or enjoyment?” *Weekly Bible Study Series*, Vol. 11 No. 13: 18 Apr. 2010; http://www.bibleresourcecentre.com/Volume_11/Joyorenjoyment.pdf

are never forsaken, nor do their children beg bread [Ps. 37: 25] **but they can most times look forsaken and their children go hungry!** The glory of the Lord is upon them and He establishes the work of their hands for them [Ps. 90: 17] **but they work extremely hard! Ask the disciples of Jesus. Ask Paul [2 Cor. 11: 16-33]. Ask aged John in exile in the island of Patmos [Rev. 1: 9]. That is why the joy of the Lord is the strength of believers [Neh. 8: 10]. God is good through your pains and pleasures. God is good but also severe.**

3. Conclusion: God did not spare His only begotten Son!

On Good Friday each year, believers commemorate the Passion of Christ. The one for 2013 occurred recently (March 29, 2013). Everything about the trial and conviction of Jesus was strange both in Judaic and Roman jurisprudence on which modern democratic societies all over the world have fashioned theirs. For example, no court opens at night. Innocent Jesus was arrested on Thursday night and by the third hour of the following day (9.00 a.m.), He was already hanging on the cross [Mk 15: 25]. Yet, Barabbas, the insurrectionist and murderer was still in custody awaiting trial! Jesus was on the cross for six good hours until the ninth hour (3.00 p.m.). As His pains became too excruciating, He cried out, saying, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachtani?" translated, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" [vv 33-34].

Where was the good God all that time? Why was He so severe on His only begotten Son? **If God "did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all" [Rom. 8: 32], why do you think that He will spare you if you do not conform to His good plans for you?** If you want to be a good follower of Christ, you must carry your own cross too. Only those who **endure to the end** will be saved [Matt. 10: 22, 38]. That should make you more attentive as you seek to know more about the goodness and severity of our heavenly Father. It is real!

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