

The Good and Beautiful God: God is Good

May 8, 2022 Sermon by Stephen Portner

Gen. 1:24-31

²⁴ And God said, "Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds: the livestock, the creatures that move along the ground, and the wild animals, each according to its kind." And it was so. ²⁵ God made the wild animals according to their kinds, the livestock according to their kinds, and all the creatures that move along the ground according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good.

²⁶ Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

²⁷ So God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

²⁸ God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

²⁹ Then God said, "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. ³⁰ And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move along the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food." And it was so.

³¹ God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day.

When God created the universe, according to Genesis chapter one, he created it in six days. Each day that God created, we are told that what God created on that day was "good." When it came to the sixth day, God created humankind – male and female – in God's image, and God not only said it was "good." God said it was "very good" (1:31). God was able to create all things "good" because God Himself is good. God would not

have been able to create anything good if his very nature was bad. Yet there are those who have false perspectives on God which represent God as anything but a good and beautiful God. Those false perspectives, in turn, give people a false outlook on life which colors everything they see, say, and do. For the next seven weeks we will be pointing out some of the common false perspectives people have about God and strive to point people toward the true, and infinitely more healthy, perspective of our good and beautiful God.

Perhaps you have heard of the response that might be typically heard in some churches. The worship leader announces, “God is good!” and the people respond, “All the time!” and then the leader says, “All the time...” and the people respond, “God is good!” That kind of back and forth response is easy enough to do when all things are going well. But when things are not going so well, it is harder to make such a proclamation.

The author of the book which I am referencing for this sermon series, James Bryan Smith, tells that he could readily proclaim “God is good” up until the day he received the news that his yet to be born child would likely be stillborn. And if the child lived, the child would likely have serious birth defects. It ended up that the child was born, lived a few years, and finally her little body gave up its fight. As if the loss of their child was not enough, people started saying some terribly ignorant and tactless things to them. Some of the comments included:

“It’s okay, honey, you can have another child.”

“Well, I am sure the Lord has a reason for this.”

“I guess God wanted her in heaven more than he wanted her here.”

“Sometimes children are too beautiful for this earth.”

But perhaps one of the worst comments they received was from a pastor, who asked James, “Who sinned..., you or your wife?”¹

James Bryan Smith wrote that these people had a view of God that was cruel, capricious, and selfish. This was an errant perspective of God that is derived from an ancient narrative about an angry God.

Nearly all ancient religions were built on a narrative that says we have to do something in order to get the blessings of the gods, and conversely, if we anger the gods we will surely be punished. The narrative is summed up as, *God is an angry judge. If you do well, you will be blessed; if you sin, you will be punished.*²

¹ James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful God*, p. 39.

² *Ibid.*, p. 40.

What did Jesus think about the belief that God punishes bad people? He was asked about this on two occasions.

The first came when he was asked to explain two horrific events, one caused by human cruelty and one caused by natural disaster.

Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices.² Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way?"³ I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.⁴ Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem?"⁵ I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish." (Luke 13:1-5)

You can hear the "punishing God" narrative in the question, Did they suffer because they were worse sinners? Jesus unequivocally says no. He shuts down this way of thinking. If there were any correlation between sin and punishment, he could have easily said yes. He used the tragedy not to explain how God punishes people but to remind them that there is a fate worse than death.

The second time Jesus confronts the "God punishes sinners" narrative [was when] Jesus encounters a man who was born blind, and is asked a question by his disciples: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him" (John 9:2-3).

...[Jesus] is making it clear that there is no correlation between someone's sin and his or her infirmity. He could have said, "Yes, it was his parents' fault. They ran after other gods, and my Father is taking it out on their child." He could also have said, "It was his own fault. When he was in his mother's womb he had some covetous thoughts, and so God made him blind." Let me emphasize again: Jesus did not say anything like this.

What is more, Jesus heals the man of his blindness. The implications of this are far-reaching. If Jesus believed the man's blindness was a fair and just punishment for his sins (or his parents' sins), he would have walked away. Justice would have demanded it. Instead, Jesus healed the blind man, and so revealed the power of God.³

One of the things that make us want to continue to hold on to the narrative of a God who blesses if we are good and punishes if we are bad is that we like control. This doesn't even make sense from a worldly point of view, for we all know of good people who have had bad things happen to them and evil people who have had good things happen to them.

Jesus clearly abolished the notion that we "get what we deserve." According to Jesus, God is not in the business of balancing some eternal checkbook. In another place Jesus uses a

³ Ibid., pp. 42-44.

famous phrase to show that God treats all people the same: "He makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous" (Matthew 5:45).

Jesus is telling us an obvious truth: just as sunshine and rain are given equally to saints and sinners with no distinction, so God gives blessings to all without regard to their behavior. Terrible things happen to wonderful people. Wonderful things happen to awful people. We cannot look around the world we live in and build a case that sinners are punished and righteous people are blessed. Reality simply does not bear this out.⁴

There is, however, a good that only the good can know. When we serve the Lord and reach out to others with compassion and kindness, then we discover a joy and a peace that those who are evil will never experience. We know that we serve a good and a just God who will one day set all things right. When we ask the good and beautiful God to be a part of our life, Christ dwells within us. We realize that we are not alone, because we allow Jesus to live in and through us, and we get to experience life in ways we could not begin to imagine without Him as our Lord and Savior. Jesus transforms our lives and our perspective on others.

A few years after his daughter had died, when James Bryan Smith was thinking about the pain of his loss and the countless sleepless nights spent in the hospital, he turned to God and said, without thinking, "Maybe it would have been better if she had never been born."

That was when he received one of the clearest experiences of God responding to him that he has ever had in his life. On that day, at that moment, a little voice penetrated his mind, the voice of a little girl, a voice he had never heard but immediately recognized as his daughter's. "Daddy, you should never say that. If I had never been born, I would not be here now. I am so happy here in heaven, and one day you and Mom... will come and see me, and we will live forever together. And there is more good that has happened because of me that you can't see now but will one day understand."⁵

We will not always understand why things happen the way they do. But we do know that God can make something good come out of whatever happens, because he is a good and beautiful God. For James Bryan Smith, one of the good things that came out of that tragedy was writing his book that impacted me so profoundly and some of which I will be sharing with you over the next couple of months. For you, it will likely be different. But know this: our God is good, and he loves you so much that he sent his Son Jesus to die for you, to save you, and to give you hope.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 44-45.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 49-50.