

Making Biblical Decisions

LESSON
EIGHT

THE EXISTENTIAL PERSPECTIVE:
BEING GOOD



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Making Biblical Decisions

Lesson Eight

The Existential Perspective: Being Good

INTRODUCTION

During the Middle Ages, philosophers and scientists sometimes engaged in a practice called alchemy. This was an attempt to turn inexpensive metals such as lead into valuable metals, like gold. Of course, the alchemists knew that lead could be disguised to look like gold or mixed with other substances to resemble gold. But they also knew that in order for lead truly to have the qualities of gold, its fundamental nature would have to be changed. It would actually have to become gold.

Well, something like this is true of people as well. Our words, thoughts and deeds are inseparably related to our fundamental nature. So, just as lead cannot truly have the properties of gold, people with corrupt natures cannot produce works that are truly good. Our actions always reflect our being.

This is the eighth lesson in our series *Making Biblical Decisions*, and we have entitled it “The Existential Perspective: Being Good.” In this lesson on being good, we will begin our exploration of the existential perspective by looking at the relationship between goodness and our being, focusing on how goodness relates to who we are.

As you’ll recall, in these lessons our model for making biblical decisions has been that ethical judgment involves the application of God’s Word to a situation by a person. This model emphasizes three essential aspects of every ethical question, namely, God’s Word, the situation, and the person making the decision.

These three aspects of ethical judgment correspond to the three perspectives we have taken toward ethical issues throughout these lessons. The normative perspective emphasizes God’s Word and asks questions like, what do God’s norms reveal about our duty? The situational perspective focuses on facts, goals and means in ethics, and asks questions like, how can we reach goals that please God? The existential perspective centers on human beings, the persons that make ethical decisions. It poses questions like, how must we change in order to please to God? And what kind of people please him? It is this existential perspective that will occupy us for the remaining lessons in this series.

As we mentioned in an earlier lesson, the term existential has been used in different ways by various philosophers. But in these lessons, we will use the term to refer to the human aspects of ethical questions. So, under the heading of the existential perspective, we will focus on issues like our character, our nature, the kinds of people we are and ought to be.

In this lesson in particular, we will be concerned with what it means for a person to *be* good. We all know that even the worst criminals sometimes *do* things that are good. But it is quite another thing for a person to *be* good. Being good has more to do with our identities, commitments, and motivations — the kinds of things the Bible describes as a person’s heart.

In this lesson on “Being Good” we will explore the relationship between being and goodness in terms of the three basic stages of biblical history. First, we will discuss

the period of creation, looking at God's own goodness, and at the fact that human beings were inherently good when God first created us. Second, we will turn to the period of the Fall, exploring the way sin damaged humanity's goodness. And third, we will speak of the period of redemption, when God restores those who are faithful to him and empowers them for goodness. Let's begin with creation, that time when it pleased the good Creator to make a good world and to populate it with good human beings.

CREATION

Our discussion of goodness at the time of creation will divide into two parts. First, we will speak of God and his goodness, explaining the fact that all true moral goodness is rooted in God himself. And second, we will describe how God created humanity to reflect his goodness. So at this point, let's look at the personal goodness of God.

GOD

As we explore the idea that goodness is rooted in God, we will begin by focusing on God's being, looking particularly at his character. And next, we will focus on a specific aspect of his character, namely his moral goodness. We'll start with a brief discussion of God's being.

Being

There are countless things that the Scriptures say about God's being, but for our purposes we will focus on the relationship between his essential attributes and his person. Simply put, God's attributes are inseparable from his person; they define who he is.

This is one reason that the writers of Scripture commonly describe and even name God according to his attributes. For example, he is called the "Father of Compassion" and "God of All Comfort" in 2 Corinthians 1:3. He is "God Almighty" in Ezekiel 10:5, the "God of Justice" in Malachi 2:17, and the "God of Peace" in Hebrews 13:20. He is the "Holy One" in Proverbs 9:10, and the "King of Glory" in Psalm 24:7-10.

The list could go on and on, but the important point is this: by identifying God's attributes in this way, the writers of Scripture were teaching us about God as a person; they were describing his fundamental character. For example, when David called the Lord the "King of Glory" in Psalm 24, he did not simply mean that God has a certain amount of glory or that God is sometimes glorious. Rather, he meant that God's glory is a critical aspect of the Lord's character, that it is inseparable from his person and central to his being.

As we consider God's being, it is important to remember that all of God's essential attributes are immutable, meaning that they can never change. For instance, God

cannot be holy one day but unholy the next. He cannot be all-powerful and all-knowing at certain times but limited in his power and knowledge at other times.

Scripture teaches this in many places, such as Psalm 102:25-27, Malachi 3:6, and James 1:17. But for the sake of time, let's look at just one of these. Listen to James' words in James 1:17:

The Father of the heavenly lights ... does not change like shifting shadows (James 1:17).

Despite all the shifts and changes that take place in creation, we can rest assured that God does not change who he is. Today, God is the same person with the same essential attributes that he was before he created the world. He will remain the same person forever.

Having spoken of God's being, we are ready to turn to the goodness that God possesses in and of himself.

Goodness

When we speak about God's goodness in the context of ethics, we have in mind his moral purity and perfection. As we have seen in prior lessons, God himself is the ultimate standard of morality. There is no external standard of goodness by which he or we can be judged. Rather, whatever conforms to his character is good, and whatever does not conform to his character is evil.

1 John 1:5-7 explains this idea in terms of "light." There John wrote these words:

God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin (1 John 1:5-7).

In this passage, light is a metaphor for truth and moral purity, while darkness is equated with sin and lies. So, since there is no darkness in God, God is perfectly free from sin in every aspect of his being. In other words, goodness is one of God's essential attributes.

Now, as we think about God's goodness in relation to his being, it helps to think once again in terms of perspectives. You'll recall that many times throughout this series we have spoken of the importance of perspectives. For example, our model involves three perspectives: the normative perspective, the situational perspective, and the existential perspective. And each perspective shows us the whole of ethics from a different point of view.

Well, something like this is true of God's attributes as well. But since God has so many attributes, it is more helpful to think of them in terms of a gemstone rather than in terms of a triangle.

Put simply, each of God's attributes is a perspective on his entire being. Each of God's attributes is dependent on the others and qualified by the others.

For instance, consider just three of God's attributes: authority, justice and goodness. God's authority is good and just. That is to say, it is good and just that God possesses this authority, and he wields his authority in good and just ways. Similarly, his justice is authoritative and good. When God pronounces judgments, they are always authoritative and good. And in the same way, his goodness is authoritative and just. His goodness upholds justice and blesses those who are just, and it also sets the authoritative standard by which all goodness is judged.

Traditionally, theologians have spoken of the interrelatedness of God's attributes under the heading of God's simplicity. By this term, theologians mean that God is not a composite of various unrelated parts, but a unified being of absolute integrity. Or to use our gemstone illustration, he is not a piece of jewelry containing many different gems, but rather a single gemstone with many facets.

It's important to understand this fact because it means that nothing in God's being can contradict his goodness or offer an opposing standard for us to follow. For example, we can never appeal to God's justice to contradict the implications of his goodness. In the character of God, if something is just, it is also good. And if it is good, it is necessarily just. His attributes always agree because they always describe the same consistent, unified person.

Having seen that all true moral goodness is rooted in the being of God, we are ready to consider the fact that God created humanity to be good. That is, he created us to reflect his personal goodness.

HUMANITY

The account of creation in Genesis 1 is familiar to most Christians. We know that God created the heavens and the earth, shaping them to give them form. And we know that he filled them with inhabitants so they would not be empty. And of course, the pinnacle of the creative week was the creation of humanity on the sixth day. Listen to Genesis 1:27-28 where Moses recorded these words:

God created man in his own image ... God blessed [humanity] and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground" (Genesis 1:27-28).

Our discussion of the goodness of humanity will focus on three details of humanity's creation mentioned in the verses we just read. First, we will consider the fact that humanity was created as the image of God, the visible representation of God that depicted his goodness. Second, we will speak of God's blessing on humanity. And third, we will mention the cultural mandate that God assigned to the human race. Let's begin with the image of God borne by humanity at creation.

Image

As we saw in Genesis 1:27, Moses wrote that:

God created man in his own image (Genesis 1:27).

Now, when theologians talk about humanity as the image of God, they often speak of attributes like reason, spirituality, moral nature, immortality, and our original righteousness. And it is true that to some degree human beings share these attributes in common with God.

But perhaps one of the best ways to understand the image of God is to look at how the ancient world conceived of images. During the time that Genesis was written, it was common for kings to erect statues and other images of themselves around their kingdoms. These statues were to be treated with respect because they were the king's surrogates. They reminded the people to love, honor and obey him.

In a similar way, God, the great king over all creation, appointed human beings to be his living images. So, when we see a human being, we see an image that reminds us of God. And when we wrongfully disrespect human beings, we dishonor the Lord whose image they are. Consider, for instance, Genesis 9:6, where God gave this instruction:

Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man (Genesis 9:6).

The reason that murderers were liable unto death was not just that they had taken a human life, but that they had assaulted the image of God; they had mounted an attack against the honor of the great king.

And beyond this, the ancient world also associated divine images with divine sonship. Specifically, the ancient kings were thought to be images of the gods as well as sons of the gods. So, in Genesis, when God made men and women in his image, he also declared the human race to be his royal children.

In fact, it is humanity's role as God's representatives and offspring that forms the basis for many of the other conclusions we draw about our goodness. Because God wanted us to be representatives and children, he created us with qualities that reflected his own perfections. Of course, humanity was not exactly like God, infinitely perfect in every way. But we were created without flaw and without sin, in conformity to the standard of his character. In this way, God established humanity with our own attribute of goodness rooted in our very being.

Blessing

This outlook on the creation of humanity as the image of God is confirmed by the fact that God pronounced a blessing on humanity. One phrase in Genesis 1:28 records an important event that took place when humanity was created. As we read there:

God blessed them (Genesis 1:28).

You will recall that throughout this series, we have defined Christian ethics as:

Theology, viewed as a means of determining which human persons, acts and attitudes receive God's blessing and which do not.

By this definition, we have defined "good" not only in terms of God's character, but also in terms of what he blesses and approves. Whatever God blesses and approves is good, and whatever God curses and condemns is evil.

So, when God blessed humanity in the creation account, he indicated that humanity was morally good. And significantly, Genesis gives no indication that humanity had done anything to earn this blessing. On the contrary, they had only just been created, so God's blessing was not an affirmation of their behavior but of their very being. He blessed them because they had the innate attribute of goodness.

Now that we have looked at humanity as the image of God and considered God's blessing on humanity, we should briefly address the cultural mandate that God assigned to the human race.

Cultural Mandate

As we saw earlier in this lesson, Genesis 1:28 records God's cultural mandate to humanity. We read these words here:

God ... said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground"(Genesis 1:28).

In keeping with humanity's role as God's image, God appointed humanity to be his vassal kings on the earth, to fill, subdue and rule it for his glory. By this assignment, God indicated that humanity was not only physically capable of accomplishing this task but morally capable as well.

As we were originally created, human beings were able to build a holy, righteous kingdom fit for God's habitation. And we were able to minister in the Lord's manifest presence without being destroyed. To do this, God created us morally pure in our being, possessing the attribute of goodness and being free from the corruption of sin. And as a result, we were able to choose and to act in morally good ways.

So, we see that for God and for humanity, goodness was rooted in our very being. God's being is unchanging, and therefore his goodness is unchanging, too. But sadly, humanity's being changed for the worse. God created us with innate goodness. But as we will see, sin corrupted our being, so that it was no longer a source of goodness.

Now that we have considered the relationship between goodness and being as it was manifested at creation, we are ready to turn to the period of the Fall. Specifically, we will look at the way sin damaged humanity's being, and thereby destroyed our goodness.

FALL

We are all familiar with the Bible's account of humanity's fall into sin, recorded in Genesis 3. God had created Adam and Eve and placed them in the Garden of Eden. And although he had given them great freedom in the garden, he had also given them a specific prohibition: they were not to eat the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

But of course, the serpent tempted Eve to eat the fruit, and she did. Then she gave some of the fruit to Adam, and he ate it as well. And as a result of the fall into sin, God cursed Adam and Eve with severe consequences that applied not only to them, but also to the entire human race that was to descend from them.

We will mention three consequences of humanity's fall into sin. First, we will speak of the corruption of our nature. Second, we will see that the Fall caused our will to become enslaved to sin so that we lost our ability to choose and to do morally good things. And third, we will discuss the ways that the Fall affected our knowledge, so that we became incapable of fully recognizing moral goodness. Let's begin with the corruption of our nature that occurred when humanity fell into sin.

NATURE

When we speak of the nature of human beings, we have in mind our fundamental character, the central aspects of our being.

As we have seen, when God created Adam and Eve, they were perfect and sinless. All their characteristics and attributes were good and pleasing to God. And therefore, we can say that human nature was morally good at the time of creation. But at the Fall, God cursed Adam and Eve for their sin. And as part of this curse, he changed their nature so that the fundamental character of the human race was no longer morally good but morally evil.

In Romans 5:12, 19 Paul wrote these words about the curse on Adam:

Sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned ... Through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners (Romans 5:12, 19).

Adam's one sin resulted in the fall of all human beings into sin. And the corresponding curse on humanity corrupted the nature of each one of us, leading to death and sin. Listen to Romans 8:5-8 where Paul described the effects of the Fall in this way:

Those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh ... For the mind set on the flesh ... is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do

so, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God (Romans 8:5-8 NASB).

Fallen humanity's nature has been corrupted so that it is no longer morally good. On the contrary, our fallen nature is evil. We desire sin. We hate God. We rebel against his law. We cannot please God. And we cannot gain his approval or blessing.

Having spoken of the corruption of our nature, we are ready to look at the way the human will became enslaved to sin as a consequence of the Fall.

WILL

We should begin by offering a definition of will. Typically, when theologians speak of our will, they have in mind our personal faculty for deciding, choosing, desiring, hoping, and intending. Simply put, our will is what we use to make decisions and choices, as well as to consider things that we would like to have, or to do, or to experience.

Now, like the rest of our attributes and faculties, our will reflects our nature. Prior to the Fall, the human will was perfect, created to reflect God and his character, and able to think and to choose in ways that were morally good. But as the Fall proved, the human will was also created with the capacity to make choices that did not please God.

As we have already seen, in the Fall Adam and Eve used their wills to choose sin instead of loyalty to God. And so God cursed the human race. And one consequence of this was that our wills were corrupted, making it impossible for us to want to please God.

In Romans 6–8 Paul uses the metaphor of slavery to describe this curse on the human will. He indicated that sin indwells fallen human beings, enslaving our wills so that we always desire and choose sin. Listen once more to Romans 8:5-8 where Paul wrote these words:

Those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh ... For the mind set on the flesh ... is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God (Romans 8:5-8 NASB).

Sin controls fallen human beings, making it impossible for us to submit to God's law or to do anything that pleases him.

Now, this does not mean that we no longer have wills or that we no longer make genuine choices. On the contrary, we continue to will and to choose according to our nature. But because our nature has been corrupted, we are incapable of doing anything that honors and glorifies God. Sin taints everything we think, say and do.

Now, at first glance this assessment of fallen human will may seem extreme. After all, sinful people do things that certainly appear to be good. Well, in one sense it would be foolish to deny this. But we must always be careful to look beyond the surface in order to understand the true character of the things that fallen, unredeemed people do.

You may recall that earlier in this series, we turned to the *Westminster Confession*

of *Faith* chapter 16, paragraph 7 to help explain this complex issue. Listen once again to what it says:

Works done by unregenerate men ... may be things which God commands, and of good use both to themselves and others; yet, because they proceed not from an heart purified by faith; nor are done in a right manner, according to the Word; nor to a right end, the glory of God; they are therefore sinful, and cannot please God, or make a man meet to receive grace from God.

These words nicely summarize the Bible's teaching about the ethical condition of unregenerate human beings — those who have not yet been redeemed by Christ. And as the Confession says, there is a sense in which unregenerate people obey God's commands, as well as a sense in which they do things that are good.

Jesus taught this same principle in Matthew 7:9-11, where he spoke these words:

Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him! (Matthew 7:9-11).

Most people do at least some things that are outwardly good, such as loving and providing for their children. So, there is a superficial sense in which even unbelievers perform the types of behavior that God blesses.

Nevertheless, the Westminster Confession rightly points out another sense in which these actions are actually sinful and cannot please God. And the reason is that these acts only meet *some* of the requirements for righteousness.

The Confession summarizes the teaching of Scripture by pointing out that our works must pass five tests in order to be truly good. First, they must be works that God commands. Second, they must be of good use to ourselves and to others. Third, they must proceed from a heart that is purified by faith. Fourth, they must be done in a right manner. And fifth, they must be done for the right end, which is the glory of God.

This point of view lines up with the approach toward ethics we have taken throughout this series. First, the fact that good works are those that God commands parallels the normative perspective in which all works are judged according to the standard of God's character as it is revealed in his Word.

Second, the emphases on good use, right end and right manner summarize the facts, goals and means of the situational perspective.

And third, the fact that good works must proceed from a heart purified by faith corresponds to the existential perspective in which authentically good works can only be done by people whose goodness has been restored through their faith in God.

Unfortunately for fallen humanity, our beings are corrupt so that we do not naturally have hearts purified by faith. And our will does not desire or strive for the right end, namely God's glory. And we refuse to submit to God's law. So, while unregenerate people can still make choices that look good on the surface, these choices are never truly

good.

Now that we have looked at the way the Fall has corrupted our nature and enslaved our will to sin, we are ready to speak about our knowledge, focusing especially on the way the Fall damaged our ability to understand God's standard.

KNOWLEDGE

It may seem odd to some of us to speak of the Fall as damaging our ability to obtain moral knowledge. After all, unbelievers can pick up a Bible and understand its commands. And Scripture itself affirms that unbelievers know many true things about God. But when we look more closely at the Scriptures, we see that while fallen and unredeemed human beings possess some true knowledge, the Fall has prevented them from obtaining a proper knowledge of God's commands.

Our discussion of the Fall's affect on moral knowledge will divide into three parts. First, we will speak of the way sin hinders humanity's access to revelation. Second, we will mention the way sin prevents humanity's understanding of revelation. And third, we will investigate sin's impact on humanity's obedience to revelation. Let's begin with the way humanity's access to revelation has been hindered by the Fall.

Access to Revelation

One of the chief ways the Fall has hindered humanity's access to revelation is by limiting the Holy Spirit's work of illumination and inward leading. Now, this is not because the Holy Spirit is somehow incapable of ministering to fallen human beings. Rather, it is because God cursed humanity by withholding these divine gifts.

As you will recall from our previous lessons, illumination is a divine gift of knowledge or understanding that is primarily cognitive, such as the knowledge that Jesus is the Messiah, which Peter received in Matthew 16:17.

And inward leading is a divine gift of knowledge or understanding that is primarily emotive or intuitive. It includes things such as our conscience, and the sense that God would have us take a particular course of action.

In some sense, God provides a measure of both illumination and inward leading to all fallen human beings. For instance, even unbelievers have an instinctive knowledge of God's law. Many of them desire justice and recognize that it is wrong to steal and to murder. Similarly, unbelievers are often convicted by their consciences when they commit certain sins.

But the Holy Spirit does not provide the same measure of illumination and inward leading to unbelievers that he provides to believers. He works within them only enough to condemn them for their violations of God's laws. And the reason for this is simple: God has chosen to reveal himself in ways that bless those who love him and that curse those who hate him.

Compare John 17:26, where Jesus prayed these words to his Father:

I have made you known to [those you have given me], and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them (John 17:26).

Jesus made himself known to believers in order to build love and unity between the Lord and his people. By contrast, he provides his enemies with only a little knowledge of himself — just enough to bring them under judgment.

In addition to reducing fallen humanity's access to revelation, the Fall has also hindered humanity's understanding of revelation.

Understanding of Revelation

Humanity's fall into sin profoundly reduced our ability to make sense of God's revelation. Even though fallen human beings still have access to much of God's revelation, we lack many of the skills needed to comprehend it. We still have the cognitive ability to understand the basic teachings of God's revelation. But moral understanding depends on more than mere cognition; it involves the whole person.

Our ethical judgments are not detached assessments of facts. Rather, many non-cognitive factors influence our ethical evaluations, such as our emotions, consciences, intuitions, loyalties, desires, fears, weaknesses, failures, natural rejection of God, and much more.

In Matthew 13:13-15, Jesus referred to this problem when he explained his use of parables:

Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand. In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: "You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes" (Matthew 13:13-15).

Fallen human beings still have eyes and ears to receive God's revelation. But our hearts are hardened against God and his truth. And this often prevents us from properly understanding the revelation we receive.

In Ephesians 4:17-18, Paul spoke about the problem in this way:

You must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding ... because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts (Ephesians 4:17-18).

The corruption of human nature in the Fall resulted in the hardening of our hearts. And this hardening keeps us from properly understanding God's revelation.

In many ways, our logic and intellect still function as they should. And this is one reason that God still holds us accountable for understanding his revelation. But the Fall

has corrupted us so that we oppose God and resist his truth. So, instead of accepting true knowledge from God, we delude ourselves into believing the lies that our sinful hearts invent.

Having seen that fallen human beings have reduced access to revelation and darkened understanding of revelation, we should turn to the way our obedience to revelation has also been corrupted by the Fall.

Obedience to Revelation

Now, it may seem odd to think of obedience as an aspect of knowledge. After all, we normally think of revelation as providing us with knowledge, and we think of obedience as a separate step that follows knowledge. And there is a sense in which this is correct. But there is another sense in which knowledge and obedience are essentially the same thing. And in this sense, the Fall hinders our knowledge of God by destroying our ability to obey him.

To understand how our inability to obey God impedes our knowledge of his standard, we will focus on just two aspects of the relationship between knowledge and obedience. First, in Scripture, there is a reciprocal relationship between obedience and knowledge. And second, we will consider some of the ways in which it can be said that in the Bible these two ideas are inseparable from one another. We'll begin with the idea that obedience leads to knowledge of God and of his standard.

In Scripture, there is a reciprocal relationship between obedience and knowledge. On one side, knowledge of God produces obedience to God. We see this in passages like 2 Peter 1:3 where Peter wrote these words:

His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness (2 Peter 1:3).

Here, knowledge is given for the purpose of producing life and godliness in our lives.

Again, this follows the pattern we have come to expect: first we receive and understand God's revelation, and then we obediently apply it to our lives. But the reverse is also true. In Scripture, obedience is a prerequisite for knowledge, and the obedient application of God's revelation in our lives leads to knowledge of him. As Proverbs 1:7 teaches us:

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge (Proverbs 1:7).

And as we read in Proverbs 15:33:

The fear of the Lord teaches a man wisdom (Proverbs 15:33).

In these verses and many others throughout Scripture, knowledge flows from obedience. That is to say, when we submit ourselves to God's lordship, we are in a position to understand his revelation.

But the Fall has corrupted our nature and our will to the point that we rebel against God. In fact, we are incapable of submitting to his Word.

And since knowledge flows from obedience, people who are unable to obey God are also unable to know him in the truest sense of the word. Or to put it another way, just as obedience leads to knowledge, sin leads to ignorance.

Having seen the problems created by the Fall, because obedience leads to knowledge of revelation, we are ready to consider the idea that in the Bible, these two ideas are inseparable from one another.

In Scripture, it is often the case that the concepts of obedience and knowledge are essentially synonymous. Sometimes they are set in apposition to one another so that one concept follows and explains the other. For instance listen to Hosea 6:6 in the New American Standard Bible:

I delight in loyalty rather than sacrifice, and in the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings (Hosea 6:6, NASB).

In this verse, the phrases loyalty rather than sacrifice and knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings are in apposition to one another, meaning that the second phrase restates the first one for clarification. So, sacrifice is synonymous with burnt offerings, and loyalty, a form of obedience, is synonymous with knowledge of God.

At other times, either obedience or knowledge is provided as a definition for the other. For example, in Jeremiah 22:16, the Lord spoke these words:

He defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well. Is that not what it means to know me? (Jeremiah 22:16).

Here, knowledge of God is defined in terms of obedience rendered to God, particularly in the form of preserving justice.

Third, Scripture sometimes demonstrates the similarity between obedience and knowledge by using one as an example of the other. Consider Hosea 4:1 where the Prophet accused Israel in this way:

Hear the word of the Lord, you Israelites, because the Lord has a charge to bring against you who live in the land: "There is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgment of God in the land" (Hosea 4:1).

Hosea listed three things that the Israelites had failed to do and that had resulted in God's anger: they were unfaithful, they were unloving, and they did not know God. By including knowledge of God in this list of ethical examples, Hosea indicated that knowledge is part of obedience, and that we have an ethical responsibility to know the Lord.

Now, obedience and knowledge do not always mean the same thing. Nevertheless, Scripture ties these ideas together quite closely teaching that, in a very important sense, if we can't obey God, we can't know him.

The Fall devastated humanity. God's curse on Adam and Eve corrupted the nature, will, and knowledge of every human being who descended from them through natural means. And the ethical consequences of this are staggering — no fallen human being can think, say or do anything that is morally good. All our thoughts, words and deeds are sinful in some measure because we are fallen, sinful people. So, whenever we make ethical decisions, we have to consider the ways that the Fall has affected every person involved.

Having considered the matter of goodness and being during the periods of creation and the Fall, we are ready to explore the period of redemption, the time when God restores those who trust him for salvation, and empowers them for goodness.

REDEMPTION

The period of redemption began immediately after the Fall when God extended mercy to Adam and Eve — even as he cursed them for their sin. In earlier lessons, we have referred to this as the *protoevangelion* or “first gospel,” when God offered to send a redeemer to repair the damage done by the Fall.

But the period of redemption did not immediately eradicate all the effects of the Fall. Rather, redemption has been a slow process, and it will not be completed until Jesus returns in glory. Until then, the Fall continues to have consequences for all human beings, including believers.

Even so, as individuals are redeemed, as unbelievers become believers, they are rescued from the consequences of the Fall in important and wonderful ways.

We will discuss the redemption of individual believers as a reversal of the Fall in ways that parallel our previous discussion. First, we will focus on our nature, speaking of how redemption restores our innate goodness. Second, we will talk about our human will and our freedom from sin. And third, we will focus on knowledge, the restoration of our ability to make proper use of God's revelation. Let's begin with how our nature is restored when we are redeemed.

NATURE

You'll recall that our nature is our fundamental character; the central aspects of our being. And as we have seen, our fallen nature is evil. We hate God and love sin, and we are incapable of moral goodness.

But when we are redeemed in Christ, our nature is renewed. When the Holy Spirit regenerates us, he gives us a good nature, one that loves God and hates sin. And he restores our moral ability so that we become capable of true goodness. Listen to Ezekiel 36:26 where God spoke about the future redemption that would come in Christ:

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26).

And in Romans 6:6-11 Paul spoke of the matter in this way:

Our old self was crucified with [Christ] so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin — because anyone who has died has been freed from sin... Count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus (Romans 6:6-11).

The consistent witness of both the Old and the New Testaments is that fallen human beings have sinful hearts and spirits. But when God redeems us, he recreates us, giving us new hearts and spirits that are righteous rather than sinful. And with these new natures, we are for the first time able to love God and to submit to his Word and thereby to gain his blessings.

Of course, our redemption is not yet complete so that even with our new natures, we are still tainted by sin. This is why in Mark 10:18 Jesus made the statement:

No one is good — except God alone (Mark 10:18).

Redeemed humanity has a measure of goodness, but we are not perfect beings like God is. Even so, our new natures make it possible for God to bless us in wonderful ways.

With this understanding of our redeemed nature in mind, we should turn to the restoration of our will that takes place when we begin to experience redemption.

WILL

Our will is our personal faculty for deciding, choosing, desiring, hoping, and intending. As we have seen, the Fall into sin made it impossible for us to use our wills in pure and righteous ways. Paul described this corruption in terms of slavery, teaching that our fallen, unredeemed wills are in slavery to the sin that indwells us. Because of this slavery to sin, we have no ability to make choices that please God, and we have no desire to please him.

But when we come to faith in Christ, sin's hold over our will is broken so that we are no longer forced to desire and to choose sin. Moreover, the Holy Spirit indwells us, strengthening and moving our wills to love and to obey the Lord. The Lord spoke of this aspect of redemption in Ezekiel 36:27, where he offered this blessing to accompany redemption:

I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws (Ezekiel 36:27).

And as Paul wrote in Philippians 2:12-13:

Work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose (Philippians 2:12-13).

Now, we need to remember that the renewal of our will does not completely solve the problem of sin in our lives. We are still indwelt by sin, so that we must constantly fight against it. But the difference is this: we are no longer enslaved by sin, forced to do its bidding. Even so, it can still be very hard to resist sin. Paul described this struggle in Romans 7:21-23, where he wrote these words about the Christian life:

When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members (Romans 7:21-23).

We can summarize the Bible's teaching on the human will in this way: At creation, our will was able both to sin and to resist sin, but when humanity fell into sin, we lost our ability to resist sin. At the same time, sin came to dwell in us as a master, enslaving our wills.

In redemption, our wills are restored, and sin's mastery is broken so that we are once again able to resist sin. And the Holy Spirit indwells us in order to strengthen and motivate us against sin.

Unfortunately, in this present stage of redemption, sin still indwells us, leaving us to struggle between the influence of sin and the influence of the Holy Spirit. But when Jesus returns to complete our redemption, we will be free from sin's indwelling presence and influenced only by the Holy Spirit so that we will never choose sin again.

Now that we have considered our nature and will, we are ready to talk about the restoration of our knowledge when we are redeemed.

KNOWLEDGE

As before, our discussion of knowledge will divide into three parts: first, we will talk about our access to revelation; second, our understanding of revelation; and third, our obedience to revelation. Let's begin with the way our access to revelation is restored in redemption.

Access to Revelation

As you will recall, the Fall significantly restricts humanity's access to illumination from the Holy Spirit, which is a divine gift of knowledge or understanding that is primarily cognitive.

We also saw that the Fall restricts our access to the Holy Spirit's inward leading, which is a divine gift of knowledge or understanding that is primarily emotive or intuitive.

But in redemption, we have greater access to these ministries of the Holy Spirit. Rather than simply giving us enough revelation to condemn us, the Spirit convinces us of the truth of the gospel and of many other things that are part of our salvation. He makes our consciences sensitive to God's character and gives us godly intuitions. For example, listen to John's words in 1 John 2:27:

[The Holy One's] anointing teaches you about all things (1 John 2:27).

And in Ephesians 1:17, Paul spoke of illumination and inward leading in this way:

I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ ... may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better (Ephesians 1:17).

Besides restoring our access to revelation, redemption also restores our understanding of revelation, again through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

Understanding of Revelation

As we have seen, the Fall caused us to become God's enemies and to resist his truth so that instead of accepting true knowledge from God, we delude ourselves into believing lies. But when we are saved, the Holy Spirit changes our hearts so that we love God instead of hating him. And he renews our minds so that we are able to grasp the truths that God reveals.

In 1 Corinthians 2:12-16 Paul explained our redeemed understanding of revelation in this way:

We have ... received ... the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us... The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them... But we have the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:12-16).

Without the Spirit of God indwelling us, we would not be able to understand God's truth. Our rebellion against God would cloud our reason, and we would believe all sorts of errors about God's character and works. But the Holy Spirit guards our hearts and our minds, destroying sin's ability to deceive us and empowering us to understand revelation. Listen to Paul's words in Colossians 1:9:

Since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding (Colossians 1:9).

Paul knew that no believer has a perfect understanding of God's revelation. So, he continually prayed for the believers in Colosse to receive further understanding. And just like them, we also need the constant ministry of the Holy Spirit so that our own understanding can increase.

So far, we have seen that redemption restores our knowledge by giving us access to revelation and by helping us form a proper understanding of revelation. At this point we are ready to talk about the way redemption restores our knowledge by fostering obedience to revelation.

Obedience to Revelation

Previously in this lesson, we described the relationship between obedience and knowledge in two ways. First, in Scripture there is a reciprocal relationship between obedience and knowledge. And second, in the Bible these two ideas are inseparable from one another.

And our discussion of the way redemption fosters obedience to revelation will follow a similar pattern. First, we will speak of the fact that there is a reciprocal relationship between redemption and obedience. And second, we will consider some of the ways in which it can be said that in the Bible these two ideas are inseparable from one another. We'll begin with the fact that redemption leads to obedience.

Scripture makes it clear that one of the main features of redemption is the obedience it produces in the lives of believers. Under the Holy Spirit's guidance and indwelling power, believers behave differently from the rest of the world. Fallen humanity hates God and cannot obey him. But redeemed humanity loves God and does obey him. The apostle John wrote about this idea frequently, such as in 1 John 2:3-6. Listen to his words there:

We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands. The man who says, "I know him," but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did (1 John 2:3-6).

The Scriptures often speak of this work of the Spirit in terms of the fruit of the Spirit. For instance, in Matthew 3 John the Baptist demanded that his disciples produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And in Galatians 5, Paul contrasted the evil things that sin produces in the lives of unbelievers with the good things that the Holy Spirit produces in the lives of believers. Listen to Paul's words in Galatians 5:22-23:

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

Through his indwelling and redeeming presence, the Holy Spirit produces the fruit of righteousness in our lives. He leads us to obey God in many ways so that we exhibit many moral and spiritual virtues.

Having looked at the fact that redemption leads to obedience, we should turn to the fact that these two ideas are inseparable from one another — that to be redeemed is to obey the Lord.

Many passages in Scripture indicate that redemption and obedience are one and the same thing. Typically, they do this by defining believers as those who are obedient to the Lord. Sometimes, this is because conversion to Christ is an act of obedience. This includes things such as our faith in Christ and our repentance from our sins. For instance, in 1 Peter 1:22-23, the apostle gave this instruction:

Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart. For you have been born again (1 Peter 1:22-23).

Peter spoke here of conversion to Christ when we are born again. And he identified this conversion as obedience to the truth.

At other times, redemption is equated with obedience because redeemed people are obedient to the Lord in many different ways. We follow his commandments because we love him. As Hebrews 5:9 says:

[Jesus] became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him (Hebrews 5:9).

In this context, the author of Hebrews was referring to Jesus' ongoing priestly work in heaven, in which he maintains our salvation through his continual intercession on our behalf. He does this for all those whose lives are characterized by obedience to him, that is, for all those who believe and are indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

As we consider the relationship between redemption and obedience, the point we want to keep in mind is this: Redemption produces obedience to God, and obedience to God produces knowledge of God and his ways.

Recall once again that the Fall corrupted our knowledge partly by making it impossible for us to obey the Lord. Correspondingly, one way that redemption reverses the curse of the Fall is by restoring our obedience, which in turn produces knowledge of God.

In light of the fact that redemption restores our knowledge of God, it should not surprise us that Scripture often summarizes redemption in terms of knowledge of God. This knowledge consists partly of cognitive content, such as knowing the facts of the gospel. But it also includes experiential and relational knowledge, such as when we speak of knowing a person. We find this teaching in places like Psalm 36:10, Daniel 11:32, and 2 John verse 1. As Jesus prayed in John 17:3:

This is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent (John 17:3).

So, in the period of redemption, our innate goodness is restored in the renewal of our nature, in the restoration of our will, and in the new knowledge of God. And by this redemption of our beings, we obtain the ability to perform good works: to say and to think and to do those things that God blesses.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we have begun our exploration of the existential perspective by exploring the relationship between goodness and being. We have looked at goodness historically, beginning with the time of creation where we saw that goodness was rooted in the being of God and that humanity was created with an innately good being. Next, we saw that the Fall destroyed humanity's innate goodness, making us incapable of morally good behavior. And finally, we saw that in the period of redemption, the goodness of our being is restored when we come to salvation in Christ, making us capable of morally good behavior.

As we work to make biblical decisions in the modern world, it is important to remember that true goodness always involves matching our character to God's character. The bad news is that we are fallen and indwelt by sin, incapable of reflecting God's goodness. But the good news is that when the Holy Spirit applies redemption to us, he indwells us and gives us new natures so that we are able to live in ways that God approves and blesses. And if we keep these facts in mind, we will have a greater ability to answer our ethical questions in ways that please our glorious Lord.

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