

THE OVERWHELMING WEIGHT OF GOD, PART 6: GOODNESS

Matthew 24:27-31; Galatians 5:22-23; 1 Peter 1:14-16 (NASB)

David Bruce Linn, Pastor-Teacher

27 March 2011

All Rights Reserved

Author Anthony Trollope, in *The Barchester Chronicles*, tells the story of Septimus Harding, a clergyman in the Church of England who has a problem. He has spent his life as warden of Hiram's Hospital, a home for aged and destitute working-class men. He has cared for them, taught them, played his cello for them, pastored them, and paid them each a stipend for many years. And now he and his hospital are coming under attack from an unscrupulous journalist and, of all people, his own future son-in-law, Dr. Bold. Through an attack editorial in the local newspaper, Harding stands accused in the public eye of corruption and nepotism. This is associated with a lawsuit against the church alleging that the income paid him is too high, and that the fact that the local pastor is his son-in-law is evidence of nepotism.

So the pastor, the bishop, and Harding consult a prominent lawyer who discovers that there has been a flaw in the filing of the lawsuit. The mistake will result in a series of continuances and refilings which will cost fifteen thousand English pounds. The reformers do not have that much money, and so through this "fine legal quibble" the hospital and Mr. Harding's position will be saved.

But this does not please Septimus Harding. In a great state of agitation he exclaims: "If the world considers me a thief it is of small comfort that a 'fine legal quibble' says that I am not!"

After he storms out, his son-in-law, the pastor reveals his insensibility to the moral component of the situation and remarks: "My father-in-law can be a very difficult person."

At this ill-considered thought the bishop replies with a piercing insight into Mr. Harding's inner motivations: "He has persistent bouts of...Christianity!"

GOODNESS CENTRAL TO CHRISTIAN IDENTITY

You see, Harding had lived and ministered with the conviction that being and doing good is central to every Christian's identity. How distressing it would be to have lived with integrity and compassion toward the needy and yet be painted for the rest of one's life as a corrupt conniver who is living in the lap of luxury. Mr. Harding, was, rather than living off the fruit of corrupt religion, fulfilling what the Bible describes as true religion. James wrote: "**Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world**" (James 1:27).

Both negative and positive aspects of goodness are included here. On the one hand, genuine Christians are the kind of people who refuse to dive into the enticing corruptions of sin. On the other hand, they display a positive willingness to care for the needy. James is making use of a figure of speech called a *synecdoche*, that is, he is using parts of things to indicate the whole. So remaining unstained by the world is not the only abstention in the practice of goodness, and visiting orphans and widows is not the only active feature of goodness. True religion has traction in our lives by concrete

behaviors of separation from evil of all kinds, and also as holy deeds of all kinds.

We have come to a strange and sad pass in the West concerning true religion. In the past religious faithfulness was interpreted culturally as goodness. No more. Society in the West now interprets religious observance as a sign of psychological weakness; a social danger sign because it reveals an allegiance to something other than self or state; a retrograde energy in a society which has made an idol of progress; and a false motive for doing good things. I cannot tell you how many times I have been told: "You only want to save babies from abortion because you are religious"—as if that invalidated the good desire. But there is no more abandoned person than the pregnant woman who is in the hands of the abortion industry. And there is no more fatherless child than the unborn baby in that woman's womb. It is obviously goodness to help such vulnerable people.

So the bishop understood Mr. Harding: "He has persistent bouts of...Christianity!" Mr. Harding's goodness was not a mere accident of personality or a byproduct of being a clergyman. It was central to his identity as a Christian, and perhaps, beyond God and family, his most prized possession.

GOODNESS A PRODUCT OF GOD'S HOLINESS

True goodness, which we find to be sweetness wherever we find it, has its ultimate source in the holiness of God. God's holiness is a combination of his "otherness" and moral perfection. Otherness means he is not us! He is separated by an impassable gulf of beingness. The otherness of God is easier to describe for what it is not than what it is. His holiness in this aspect beggars words. Its other aspect of moral perfection is easier to grasp, though A. W. Tozer warned us not to assume that it is merely our understanding of good morals pushed to the maximum.

But it is the moral perfection of God's holiness which is seen on the earth as goodness in people. Scripture says that "**Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow**" (James 1:17). Every good thing you have ever seen on earth has its origin in the perfections of a holy God. That includes good things done by those who do not know God.

And when the Holy Spirit brings transformation to the souls of believers, goodness is one of the natural outcomes because it is part of his nature: "**But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law**" (Galatians 5:22-23).

A NEED TO FEEL THE WEIGHT OF HOLINESS

That is why the increasing absence of God from daily life in the West has driven holiness out of our minds, and with it the human goodness which springs from it. Moral breakdown is rampant and has become a defining feature of our time. David Wells, in *No Place for Truth*, writes: "It is this holiness of God...that provides the light that exposes modernity's darkness for what it is. For modernity has emptied life of serious moral purpose. Indeed, it empties people of the capacity to see the world in moral terms, and this, in turn, closes their access to reality, for reality is fundamentally moral" (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993, p. 300). We desperately need to feel the overwhelming weight of God's holiness as Christians and as a culture. And it goes without saying that if we, as believers in God and Christ, do not

feel the weight of God upon us, our culture has no hope.

A focus on the return of Christ can have this wonderful effect on our minds. It is described for us in Matthew 24:27-31: **"For just as the lightning comes from the east and flashes even to the west, so will the coming of the Son of Man be. Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather. But immediately after the tribulation of those days THE SUN WILL BE DARKENED, AND THE MOON WILL NOT GIVE ITS LIGHT, AND THE STARS WILL FALL from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the SON OF MAN COMING ON THE CLOUDS OF THE SKY with power and great glory. And He will send forth His angels with A GREAT TRUMPET and THEY WILL GATHER TOGETHER His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other."**

Have you ever thought about the meaning of the light and darkness in this passage? We are told that like lightning, the return of Christ will flash from one horizon to the other. It will be preceded by a complete blackout. The God who made the sun, moon, and stars on the fourth day of Creation is going to demonstrate his mastery over them by turning them off the way we turn off the lights in our homes. The whole world will go dark--perhaps so that we can experience the absence of this good thing. Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky. Everyone will know that it is him—and will mourn.

Then comes the Son of Man himself, riding on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory. What is this shining glory which everyone on earth can see? It is the physical revelation of Christ's holiness. It is the radiance of his true nature, about which the angels around the throne never cease to say: **"Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts, /The whole earth is full of His glory"** (Isaiah 6:3). It is the *shekinah* glory from the Israelite tabernacle in the wilderness and the Temple in Jerusalem. This divine light was the defining feature of the inmost chamber, the holy of holies, into which no one could enter upon pain of death except for the High Priest on the Day of Atonement.

This light is the radiance which shone from Christ's person on the Mount of Transfiguration. And finally, this blinding glory is the only source of light in the New Jerusalem where believers in Christ dwell for eternity, as the Apostle John wrote: **"I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. And the city has no need of the sun or of the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God has illumined it, and its lamp is the Lamb"** (Revelation 21:22-23). That is why every eye will see him when he returns!

And that is why all of the people of the earth will mourn. No one will be able to say: "We don't know what that is!" The Book of Revelation tells us that everyone--believers excepted--will say to the mountains: **"Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?"** (Revelation 6:16-17). The glory of God's holiness speaks for itself. It needs no interpreter. And the impact upon the human soul, in light of our sin, is that we mourn as the weight of that holiness falls upon us.

BECOMING CHILDREN OF OBEDIENCE

This crushing experience of the holy glory of God has a most beneficial impact on the human

soul, at least for those who believe. It makes us cry out: "My guilt is too much for me to bear! I need cleansing! I want to be a better man! I want to be a better woman!" So said Isaiah when confronted with a prophetic revelation of God's glory upon his heavenly throne: "**Woe is me, for I am ruined! /Because I am a man of unclean lips, /And I live among a people of unclean lips; /For my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts**" (Isaiah 6:5).

This is the first step in the transformation of our souls in the direction of goodness. This confrontation with holiness shows the blackness of our souls in sharp relief, and if we have even a small measure of faith we will want to do something about it. Although this is a fearful experience, we should covet it! We will never be good without it. Wrench open your heart and mind, crack open the word of God, and let God speak to you about who he is. Then dispel the darkness of your soul by confessing your sins to God and receiving forgiveness for them all through the atonement of Christ on the cross. Isaiah had his lips touched by a hot coal from the fire of heaven. We have the blood of Christ.

The second dynamic of transformation is that we receive the impartation of goodness as a fruit of the Holy Spirit in our lives, as we read earlier: "**But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, [and] self-control...**" (Galatians 5:22-23). When holiness comes to dwell in our hearts we receive a radical rewiring of our souls if we will receive it by faith. By that impartation we will want to do good because we have goodness resident within us. We appropriate this by faith and obedience, but it is the gift of God.

And then the lifelong process of becoming children of obedience begins, as the Apostle Peter described it: "**As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance, but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, 'YOU SHALL BE HOLY, FOR I AM HOLY'**" (1 Peter 1:14-16).

I am aware that most translations simply use the phrase "obedient children," but I am inclined to hear a Hebrew idiom coming from Peter, the Jewish man. Believers are literally called "children of obedience." A similar expression is "sons of light," which means not only that these sons have the attribute of light (Greek attributive genitive), but that it is, in fact, the light which makes them sons. The light gives birth to them as sons, we might say.

There was a women's revival prayer group in one of my churches which had no name. It was a most wonderful collection of "on fire" women with the ministry of intercession. So I named them the "Daughters of Zeal." Yes, they were daughters of God with the attribute of zeal, but it was also true that zeal gave birth to them in that identity. And so I say that not only are we children of God who have the attribute of obedience, obedience has a key role in shaping us as children of God.

Peter breaks this down into two actions, first that we decouple the engine of sinful desire in our lives: "**... Do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance...**" We must not permit our identity as we walk this earth to be shaped by the world, the flesh, and the devil. Those bad influences will have great power until the end of the world, but we do not have to remain connected to that power.

I am reminded of a home repair experience I had with our clothes washer which we purchased in 1991. This unit cleaned our clothes for the family years and is still serving us today. Barb came to me

one day in distress that the tub would not spin. We could hear the motor running and the pump would empty the water out, but the tub and agitator were motionless. I took an access plate off the bottom and found mounds of shredded soft nylon plastic. Through the wonders of the internet I learned that the coupler which connects the motor to the tub had disintegrated. It was not hard to repair, and I taped an extra coupler to the back of the machine in case it happened again.

The energies of our sinful lusts will never be completely eradicated, but we can decouple from them. When they are pressing us to do or say the wrong thing we talk back to them and say: "No, I will not do that because I am a son or daughter of obedience to the Holy God." We are no longer ignorant about who God is and what he requires of us. Neither are we ignorant of how his Holy Spirit empowers us to obey him rather than follow our sinful desires.

To the positive, Peter delivers the Lord's command that we become holy. The translations uniformly say "be holy," but the Greek verb "to be" used here has the strong flavor of "become holy." We engage the process by decoupling the engine of lust and coupling the engine of the Holy Spirit by obeying the Holy God in everything. That means holy thought, holy finances, holy sexuality, holy political involvement, holy family life, holy recreation--even holy driving.

And we do this because our God is holy. He does not command us to have the same kind or measure of holiness as he does, for that is impossible. But we can indeed have the communicable aspects of holiness in human measure. Goodness is a big part of that.

The English clergyman Septimus Harding invented by Anthony Trollope for his story was a good man, and his goodness could be seen in his words, his service to the Lord, and his very countenance. When this central aspect of his identity in Christ was called into question he became very upset. His son-in-law understood none of this, but the Bishop did: "He has persistent bouts of...Christianity!"

Do you have persistent bouts of Christianity? The weight of God is necessary to work this change within us. Specifically, the shock of confrontation with God's holiness is essential for the development of goodness in our lives. Not "relatively" good, not "sort of" good, but good in a way that rings true by comparison to the character of a Holy God.

If you have already received Christ, I advise you to run toward the light of God's holiness as a way of life. It will shock, blast, and change you. That's a good thing.

If you have not yet received Christ's atonement by confessing your sins to God, his holiness is death to you until you do. You must begin by asking him for forgiveness. And then the Holy One will become your heavenly Father, your Friend, and your King.

[clip from *Anthony Trollope's The Barchester Chronicles*, BBC DVD (2005) Volume 1, Episode 1, 0:43:11-0:45:08, Barchester_DSC1_bouts_of_Christianity.avi, 1:53 min.]