

The Moral Nature of God

Maurice W. Lusk, III

In the previous lesson we considered God as a Supreme Being and the supernatural attributes he possesses because he is a Supreme Being. This aspect of his being he has revealed to us, but there is more to him that we have seen thus far. Not only is being supernatural in his nature essential to being a Supreme Being, perfection or completeness in all aspects of his being necessitates that he be a moral being as well. This aspect of his nature he has revealed to us as well, and these attributes are revealed to us in Scripture.

There are two major headings under which all the other moral attributes of God may fall. The first is his **holiness**, the second, his **goodness**. All moral attributes of God may be listed under one or the other of these two attributes. Because he is holy, he is righteous, just, and intolerant of evil (he is wrathful). Because he is all-good (omni-benevolent), he is loving, merciful, and gracious. All references to God's moral character synonymous with one or the other of these attributes, i.e., his holiness or his goodness. This can be confusing but it does not need to be. Many of the moral characteristics ascribed to God in Scripture are one and the same with another characteristic having been translated from the Hebrew or Greek text using a different but similar word. For example, the term "loving kindness" is simply an alternate translation of the Hebrew word for "grace." To say that God is "longsuffering" is another way of saying that he shows "mercy." Of all the moral attributes of God, it is safely said that all flow from the moral characteristics of "Holiness" and "Goodness."

He Is a Holy God

Rudolf Otto, in his book *The Idea of the Holy*, describes the holiness of God as his "wholly otherness." This is somewhat of an

unusual expression but it does communicate something of the essence of the Biblical concept of holiness. God is completely other than anything we know in our realm of existence, in terms of his moral nature. The Hebrew word for holy is *qadosh*. It is a word that is rooted in the idea of "separated," i.e., that which stands apart because it is special or unique. It is closely associated with the word *kabod*, meaning "heaviness or weight" and later, "glory or splendor," i.e., that which is impressively weighty, as in the weight of a monarch's garments or the size of this throne.

The association of the idea of the impressiveness or the splendor with the idea of separateness from that which is common or unclean, the idea of the holy was that which cause awe and wonder. *Kabod* is intrinsic to God's *qadosh*. From this association of *kabod* with *qadosh* God's holiness came to be understood as his moral purity which was such that it set him apart in magnificence or grandeur. The glory or splendor of such a magnificent thing brings awe or humbling to the one beholding it. Hence *qadosh* is that which, because it is set apart with such magnificence and purity, causes awe, fear, and trembling.

The Hebrew word *qadosh* is translated in the Greek Septuagint by the word *hagios*, which does not communicate the idea of weight, heavy, or grand, neither the idea of splendor or glory. It is the word for "pure or undefiled, that which is separated from what is common or unclean." If something is *hagios* it is separated, set apart or distinguished from or "other than" that which is ordinary, common, impure or unclean." Hence, Otto's definition of holy as "wholly other." But how does one go from the idea of magnificence or splendor to the idea of separated from that which is impure, common or unclean? The idea was born from the union of the Hebrew *qadosh* and the Greek *hagios*. God, in his supernatural nature, his moral essence, and supremacy of being, is "wholly other" than any being or thing conceivable. The various manifestation of God in Scripture bring fear and trembling because of the magnificence and splendor of his being. The very weight of his existence distinguishes or separates him from every other thing or being, and with this we associate the idea of his moral excellence or sacredness. The very nature of his

being is so pure and undefiled as to be separate from all that is common, impure or unclean. The idea intrinsic within the Hebrew *qadosh*, united with the idea intrinsic within the Greek *hagios*, gives us our Biblical concept of holiness. It is this aspect of God's being that causes fear and trembling and, at the same time, fills us with awe and wonder. Because he is holy his moral character is such that he is separated from all that is immoral, impure, or unclean.

Rudolf Otto refers to this concept as that which draws man to God and fills him with wonder and, at the same time, fills him with fear and trembling. This phenomenon he calls *mysterium tremendum*. It was the manifestation of God's holiness which drew Moses to the burning bush but once he realizes that he was in the presence of the holy (i.e., standing on holy ground) he was filled with fear and trembling (cf. Exod 3). Belief in God can bring about this experience. We are drawn to him in belief by the very wonder of his being and, at the same time, we are overwhelmed with awe at the very thought of such a being and the realization that such a being is aware of us (Psalms 29:2; 2:11; 29:2; 89:7; 96:9). The words, occurring again and again in Scripture, used to describe man's experience in the presence of the holiness of God, are "awe" and "wonder!"

The Scriptures are filled with references to God as "**the Holy**," "**the Holy One**" or "**the Holy One of Israel**" (Isaiah 6:3; 40:25; 43:2; 45:11). Because he is holy, he is the sum of all moral excellence; there is not a shadow of immorality or evil in him (Hab 1:13; 1 John 1:5). Holiness describes the very essence of God's moral nature. He is morally perfect, hence, he is "wholly other" than anything that may be conceived of as evil. Because God is holy there is no unrighteousness or iniquity in him, no injustice, nor can he be indifferent or tolerant toward evil (i.e., evil must experience the wrath or indignation of God). Because of the very nature of the attribute of holiness, other attributes may be ascribed to God. Because he is holy, he is: (1) righteous, (2) just, and (3) intolerant of evil.

Because God is Holy, He is Righteous

In Isaiah 5:16 we read: ". . . the Lord Almighty will be exalted

by his justice, and the holy God will show himself holy by his righteousness." The word righteous, in Hebrew and Greek, means, "that which is right." To be righteous is to act in a right manner, to do the right thing or to make things right. To be made righteous is to be brought into conformity with that which is right or to have a right standing and, hence, to be acceptable and/or worthy of fellowship.

To say that God is righteous is to say that his actions are right in his treatment of his creation (1 Sam 12:7; Psalms 119:137, 172; 145:17) and that he makes things right when they are not (cf., Psalms 35:24-28; Isa 45:15-25; 50:7-9; 51:5; 56:1; Micah 7:9). More than this, he can make us right when we are not (Rom 1:17; 3:21-31); and when this is done we are acceptable to him and worthy of fellowship with him. He is righteous in all his being and in all his doings:

Like your name, O God, your praise reaches to the ends of the earth; your right hand is filled with righteousness. (Psalms 48:10.) . . . Your righteousness reaches to the skies, O God, you who have done great things. Who, O God, is like you? (Psalms 71:19)

Because God is Holy, He is Just or Fair

Closely associated with the idea of righteousness is the idea of justice. In fact, in the Hebrew Scriptures, and the Greek New Testament, righteous and justice are the same word. This is because in both Hebrew and Greek thought, to act in a right manner is to act justly; and to justify something is to declare it right. To say that God is a just God is to say that his actions are right in the treatment of his creation.

This is the essential meaning of justice as an attribute of God. It has more to do with God's dealings with people than with some abstract principle hanging out there in the universe to which even God himself must be subject. There can be no attribute of God that conflicts with other attributes of his nature. To think of justice as an absolute principle of law (i.e., rendering to every man that which is due him) and that God must consistently enforce it in order to be God is to misunderstand justice.

As already mentioned, God's justice and his righteousness are one and the same and justice with God has to do, primarily, with his treatment of his creation. He treats everyone as they should be treated. Perhaps a more contemporary word for what we are talking about would be "fairness." He treats us all fairly. He is no respecter of persons in this regard (Deut 10:17; Acts 10:34; Rom 2:11; Gal 2:6; 1 Peter 1:17).

In terms of law, justice is rendering to every man that which is due him. Every transgression is subject to immediate punishment. But God may look into the soul of the transgressor and see there something redemptive about him; something that justifies withholding punishment. The word for this is "mercy" and that word means not rendering to a person the punishment due him. The point to see here is that God's justice cannot be understood in such a way that it is violated by his mercy. Because he knows the heart of a man, he knows when mercy is more just than "absolute justice" (Gal 2:6; 1 Peter 1:17; Isaiah 55:7-9). See also: Psalms 11:7; 97:2-6; Deut 32:4; Job 8:3; 37:23; Zeph 3:5.

Because he is Holy, He is Intolerant of Evil

Because God is holy he cannot be indifferent toward moral malignancy, wickedness, sin or evil. As Hab 1:13 says, "Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong." This is a difficult concept for us to follow. We have said that God is merciful. How can we say that wrath is also a part of his nature? Perhaps the term "wrath" is an unfortunate choice of terms here, but it is a word (in a variety of Hebrew terms) that the Biblical writers chose to use.

It is the case that this is the word the Biblical writers chose to express God's action in responds to his intolerance of evil and his indignation at the presence of evil in the behavior of his creation. But, when speaking of the wrath of God in the same breath as the mercy of God, are we not being inconsistent? We must remember that every transgression committed is subject to immediate punishment. We see instances in Scripture where God moved upon evil in an immediate way, yet, in other instances, he withheld punishment. The difference

must be that he saw something redemptive - something worth saving - within those he chooses to show mercy. Those who are full of moral malignancy, who love the darkness and wish to be in the darkness, God relinquishes to their sins, or better, to the consequences of their choices (e.g., Rom 1:18-31).

Here is a point we should not miss. From the very beginning of man's existence God has allowed him to choose his behavior and his consequent destination in eternity. Just as he gave Adam a choice between the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, he gives man today the same choice. The world in which we find ourselves is "a vale of soul making" in which we are fitting ourselves for eternity. If we choose disbelief and its consequences, God will respond to our choice with the attending consequences. The same book that portrays God as love also portrays him to us as a consuming fire. How he comes to us in the hour of reckoning is our choice (cf., Heb 12:28-29; Rom 9:22; 11:22; 2 Cor 5:10; John 3:36; Eph 5:6; Col 3:4-6). Because God is faithful to his word, he will render to every man according to his choices. He will not impose his salvation and his fellowship on any man, nor will he usurp the free moral agency of anyone. The choice is ours, God only sees that choice realized.

He Is a God of Moral Goodness (Omni-Benevolence)

The concept before us here is goodness in an absolute sense. God is omni-benevolent (all good), there is no evil in him at all. Goodness has been variously defined, but the consensus seems to be that calling a thing good is to say that it is everything it ought to be in the expectations of the beholder. Both the Hebrew and Greek words for good convey the basic idea of that which brings satisfaction because it is all that it should be. There is that which is externally or physically good, that which may be intellectually affirmed as good, there is goodness in the sense of behavior, especially in a social sense (i.e., we are good to one another), and good may be used in the sense of moral excellence. It is the social aspect of the word with which we are concerned here. The God revealed in Scripture is a God who

treatment of his creation is "good."

*Great is the Lord and most worthy of praise; his greatness no one can fathom. One generation will commend your works to another; they will tell of your mighty acts. They will speak of the glorious splendor of your majesty, and I will meditate on your wonderful works. They will tell of the power of your awesome works, and I will proclaim your great deeds. They will celebrate **your abundant goodness** and joyfully sing of your righteousness. The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. The Lord is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made (Psalms 145:3-9).*

As with the attribute of holiness, other attributes are intrinsically associated with goodness. Because God is good he is also: (1) loving, (2) merciful, and (3) gracious. These are all manifestations of the goodness of *God*.

Because God Is Good, He Is Loving

The Old Testament concept of love is very generic. The Hebrew word *ahab* can mean anything from love between a husband and wife, love of friend to friend, a love of family, or to the love of God for Israel (cf., Deut 7:8, 13; 23:5; Isaiah 48:14; 63:9).

In the New Testament the concept of God as "a God of love" is fully revealed in the life of Jesus, the one who came to show us the Father. The Greek language has four distinct terms for love. The word *agape* is the most unique and dynamic of the four. This is most likely because of how it was used by the early Christians. *Agape* is, essentially, "good will toward." It is love with no selfish motives. The love of God, like other of his moral attributes, is an attribute that proceeds from the nature of God and reproduces that aspect of his nature within those in whom it dwells. This aspect of God's nature is beautifully developed in the following New Testament references. In Rom 5:5 we read of "**the love of God,**" then in 2 Cor 13:11 we read of "**the God of love,**" and in 1 John 4:16 we are told that "**God is love.**" Following is a selection of some of the most informative New Testament references on this theme: John 3:16; Rom 5:5, 8; 8:39; 2 Cor

13:11; 1 John 3:1, 6; 4:6-10, 16, 19.

Because God Is Good, He Is Merciful

The term for mercy in the Hebrew Scriptures is *chesed* meaning mercy, pity, or kindness. The Greek term is *eleos* meaning mercy or pity. As a legal term, mercy is not rendering to a person the punishment due him. To show mercy is to withhold punishment or do what one can to prevent or deliver one from undesirable consequences. In both the Old and New Testaments, mercy has to do with God's longsuffering and patience in not visiting the sinner with the consequences of his choices, i.e., disbelief, rebellion, defiance, etc.

In Israel this was one of the most cherished attributes of God. God's mercy was the only reason Israel continued to be his people. The Day of Atonement or *Yom Yippur* (Lev 16) was, in effect, a day of acknowledgment of sin, a declaration of repentance, a ritual of blood, and a celebration of God's mercy and forgiveness. All of this occurred when Israel, in the personification of the High Priest, presented itself before God at the Mercy Seat in the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle or Temple. When God showed mercy to Israel, he withheld the punishment due them because of their sins.

This aspect of God's moral nature is seen in both Testaments: Psa 25:7; 100:5; 101:1; 103:8, 11; 106:1; 107:1; 118:1; 136:1-26 (in the Hebrew text the term here is *chesed* [mercy], the NIV, however, translates it as "love," which is not a precise translation). See also: Luke 1:50, 54, 72, 78; Rom 9:15-18; 15:9; 1 Cor 7:25; Eph 2:4; Titus 3:5; Heb 4:16; James 5:11; 1 Peter 1:3; 2:10.

Because God Is Good, He Is Gracious

This attribute is best understood when set in juxtaposition to mercy. Mercy is not rendering to one what he deserves (i.e., punishment), grace goes beyond this and gives as a gift that which is not deserved (i.e., showing kindness, favor, giving gifts or displays of favor, etc.). In the Hebrew Scriptures this is the sense of the Hebrew term *chen*, which essentially means "to stoop down" in order to show

"lovingkindness" and the term is most usually translated that way (cf., Gen 6:8; 19:19; Exod 33:12-13; Psa 3:34; 84:11; Zech 12:10). The idea of grace in the New Testament, however, is far more dynamically present and specifically developed.

This is especially the case in the writings of the Apostle Paul where the Greek term *charis* has a much more multicolored meaning than the Hebrew *chen*. The Hebrew *chen* conveys the essential idea of "unmerited or underserved favor." The Greek *charis* contains this idea but it is used by Paul in a much more dynamic way. In numerous occurrences Paul speaks of the unmerited favor God has shown to mankind in the salvation wrought through Christ. This concept, as grand as it is, is not the only meaning Paul gives to the term. In fact, Paul thinks of *charis* as more than the Hebrew *chen* and speaks of this divine attribute of God as a force having been set loose in the world as a competing power with the malevolent power of sin.

In Paul's thinking, Grace, as an attribute of God, is a power that has the ability to take on its own life in the life of a believer. More than this, it is an active presence in the world as a benevolent power of God. The grace of God, as a benevolent power, Paul speaks of as the very presence of God's goodness at work in the world which is set against the reign of sin as a Satanic power at work in the world.. He says in Rom 5:21, "But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more, so that as sin reigned in death, even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." This concept of grace is, in the theology of Paul, an extension of that very moral attribute of God under consideration here. Because he is good, he is gracious and his grace can manifests itself in our world and in our very lives. See in the NT: Rom 3:24; 5:15, 21; 1 Cor 1:4; 2 Cor 1:12; 9:8, 14; Eph 1:6-7; 2:7; 2 Thess 1:12; 1 Tim 1:14; Titus 2:11; 3:7; Heb 4:16; 1 Peter 5:10, 12.

Conclusion

The principle of divine causation easily allows us to believe that a Supreme Being is essential to this concept. There is every good reason to believe that God is the cause standing behind the whole of

creation and there is no good reason to doubt it. Alternative causes suggested have proven to millions to be unbelievable; i.e., there is no good reason to believe them and every good reason to doubt that they are adequate to account for our existence. Of course, the presupposition of divine causation is a given for the one accepting this as true, and that is fully acknowledged. Beyond this point, however, man would be at a loss to say anything more about this "first cause." If the God of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures had not moved to reveal himself to us, he would be only a "first cause" to us, and nothing more. However, he has revealed himself as the Supreme Being who created this world and those who inhabit this world. Of more importance to us is the fact that he has informed us that he is the creator of man himself, and that he created man in his own image.

The significance of this for us is that if man is created in the image of God, he must know his creator in order to know himself. This is why God's revelation of himself to man is such an important matter. If we have been created in the image of God, how is such a concept to be understood? It cannot be the case that we are created in his image as a supernatural being who is omnipresent (spirit, eternal, and universal), omniscient (all knowing), and omnipotent (all powerful). A simple comparison of our nature to his is all that is necessary to this conclusion. Even though man may possess a life force or spirit, may be cognoscente, and possess some power and authority as a being, he possesses none of these attributes in an "*omni*" sense.

How, then, do we make sense of this concept? It must be that he created man in the image of his moral nature. Is it his moral nature we are to reflect in our existence or, at least, are supposed to reflect in our existence? This would be evident from the fact that the whole of God's revelation of himself to man has been to show him how, as a being created in his image, we are to behave morally. He created this world as a vale of soul making for man and placed him here for the purpose of fitting himself for eternity - an eternity with God. In order to have fellowship with God we must be able to enter into his presence. This means we must be holy and good. He has told us to be

holy, because he is holy. He has, through centuries of revelation, instructed man in moral behavior, in what it means to be righteous, justice, and intolerance of evil. He has called every age of man to goodness and has given him instruction in the divine attributes of love, and mercy, and grace.

This has been a story of God's sojourn with mankind through the centuries. He has revealed himself in his word, again and again; and in these last days he has come here himself to show us how to live as beings created in his image. In the person of Jesus of Nazareth he has shown the human race how to be holy and good - how to live as a being created in the image of God.

MWLIII

Questions for Discussion

1. Do you think it is necessary for God to be morally perfect in order to be a Supreme Being?
2. How does an understanding of the moral nature of God give us an understanding of ourselves?
3. Gen 1:26-27 says that man is created in the image of God. To what extent is this true?
4. If God is holy, to what extent should man be holy?
5. In what way do God's righteousness, justice, and intolerance of evil reflect God holiness?
6. If God is good, to what extent should man be good?
7. In what way do God's love, mercy, and grace reflect his goodness?
8. If God is good, to what extent should we be good?
9. Discuss the concept of God's grace as a living presence of a divine

attribute at work in our world and in our lives.

10. Discuss the concept of man as a being created in the image of God in light of the New Testament presentation of Christ as the image of God; cf., Rom 8:29; 2 Cor 4:4; Col 1:15; 3:10; Heb 1:3. How is this significant to us?