

GOD IS GOOD

*like no other*¹



“Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good—except God alone.”
Mark 10:18

In a telephone call one day, while *It Was Good: Making Art to the Glory of God* was first coming together, painter Edward Knippers identified a glaring weakness in the project—it was missing a chapter on goodness. And the fact that no one wanted to tackle the topic was no excuse. Since the word was in the book’s title and, even more importantly, because the word saturates the account of God’s creativity in Creation, the concept *had* to be engaged. So we talked over some of the relevant points, identified potential questions, and then he told me to write it.

A WORLD WITHOUT THE FALL

God’s Word is clear that those who are baptized into Christ and clothed in Him are called to be good and beyond that, to take His Kingdom paradigm and apply it to all values and actions. But does it follow that a Christian’s handiwork should “do good” as well? For those called to truly be imitators of the Creator, the answer is yes—they need to be good, do good and *make* good. That precedent is clearly set in Genesis 1 in the activity of the Maker of Heaven and Earth. So for believers making art to the glory of God, goodness is not merely something to strive for in their morality, it is also something that should permeate their aesthetic efforts. Certainly not in a garrishly didactic “I’ve got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart” way, but in such a way that goodness infuses the overall body of their work like rich roots growing deep and wide. Yet the rub is, if you decide to make art intended

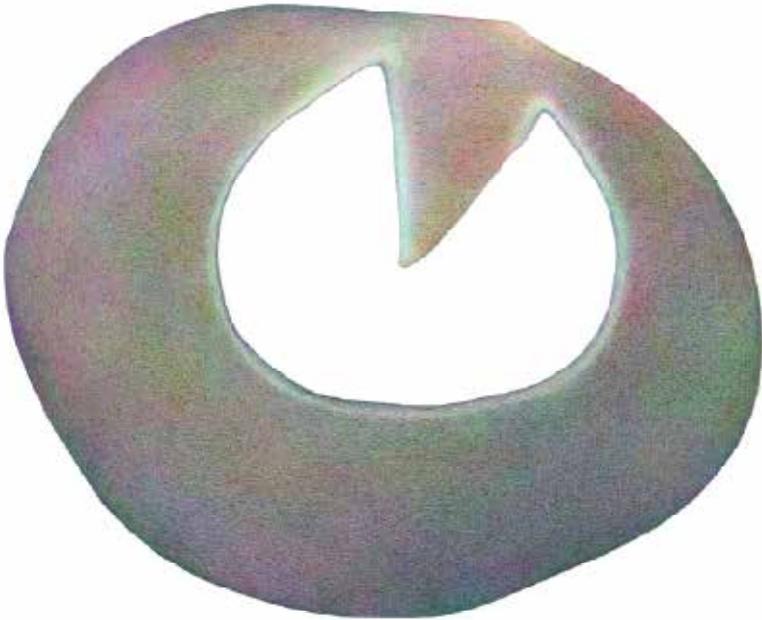
to communicate goodness, you'll find the goal is easier to assert than accomplish, because portraying *good* with any precision is excruciatingly difficult.

Inevitably it seems that most attempts to picture good tend to offer the viewer disingenuous, sugary sweet propaganda. Ignoring the implications of the Fall, these artists paint the world as a shiny, happy place. The quintessential example of this in our day is found in Thomas Kinkade's general philosophy. Kinkade professes to be a Christian but has said, "I like to portray a world without the Fall."² Yet the opposite extreme is almost easier to fall into: despair—ignoring goodness in favor of pursuing negative themes or motifs. Looking around we have to agree with Stuart McAllister that "much of the energy and effort of our artists and cultural architects has gone into debunking, dismantling, or deconstructing all that is good, beautiful, and respected, to be replaced with the shallow, the ugly, the ephemeral."³ In contrast, followers of Christ who labor in the arts must oppose this deconstruction by taking up the subject of *good* or *goodness* to the glory of God. They need to struggle to understand it, and to present it, as neither sacchrine nor lost in the mire that surrounds us. Instead it should be conveyed in such a way that a world—forgetful of true goodness since the Fall—can be taught what the word means, and so be led to the only good One. This is a unique opportunity. Christ gives believers the potential to understand good, for if one knows Christ he knows God. Without this basic theological understanding, one's knowledge of God is perverted.

AND GOD SAID IT WAS KALOS

We are confronted with the concept of *good* from the very beginning of Scripture. God made the cosmos to display His goodness. And we are informed by the writer of Genesis that what God made was good. In fact, God said so Himself—the Creator evaluated His own work and pronounced, "It was good." God's goodness moved His wisdom to conceive of creation and His power to make it. This world He created bore no resemblance to the yin-yang pictures of the world presented in other creation stories. What the Almighty made was good in every way for its purpose. It was useful, healthy, and morally perfect.

God's pronouncement on creation transcends mere usefulness because the evaluation of creation's goodness came before anyone could use it. For example, following the creation of light, God said that "it was good." This is not just a pragmatic 'good,' because at that point in the sequence of creation there were no plants existing to conduct photosynthesis using the light, and no humans to work and play in the light. The light merely existed and it was good. "Creation is useful because it is good. It is not good just because it is useful."⁴ The universe was made by God, it conformed to His nature, reflected His image and therefore was pronounced 'good.' Though it is drastically altered in the Fall, this goodness of creation has not been obliterated. It can still be seen in the beauty of the earth and in Man the image-bearer of God.



PETER MOLLENKOF. *Largess*, 2001. Colored pencil on paper, 20 x 26 inches.

The word used in Genesis 1 for *good* in the Hebrew is *tôb* (pronounced “tuv”) and conveys the broad meaning of that which is good, useful, and especially good morally—while also conveying the aesthetic moment of beauty. The word for good in Greek is *kalos*. *Kalos* has the sense of aesthetically beautiful and morally good, and pertains to that good which brings joy to God. So in the first chapter of Genesis, whenever it says that God saw that what He had made was good (or very good), a form of the word *kalos* is being used. Certainly the unfallen creation was morally good, but it seems that the aspect of good in focus here is what was pleasing to God and beautiful. This understanding of good as both morally right and *beautiful* provides us with a fascinating reread of Scripture. A small sampling yields examples such as Genesis 2 in which we learn that God told Adam that he must not “. . . eat from the tree of the knowledge of *beautiful* and evil . . .” and that “It is not *beautiful* for the man to be alone.” In the New Testament we read that “every tree that does not produce *beautiful* fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.” (Matthew 3:10), that “The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed *beautiful* seed in his field” (Matthew 13:24). Jesus says, “I am the *beautiful* shepherd. The *beautiful* shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:11). And Paul writes, “Let us not become weary in doing *beautiful*, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not

give up.” (Galatians 6:9). Since the Bible is permeated with this rich, aesthetic, moral, and joy-bringing word, a narrowing of our study is necessary. In this essay we will try to limit our meditation to good as it is used to describe God.

We find this word applied to God in at least three ways. The first application is in *creation* by God making us in His image, giving us souls and placing us in a beautiful garden. Second, in *redemption*, since God was not obligated to show us mercy after we, through Adam, rebelled against the Creator’s goodness (as He hadn’t shown any to the angels who rebelled). And third, God’s *providence* displays His goodness. As J.I. Packer points out in *Knowing God*, God is “good to all in some ways and to some in all ways.”

In addition to God’s goodness being something He does or pronounces, the Bible also teaches that goodness is an essential part of His being. When Moses asked to see God’s glory, we find that His glory is His goodness:

And the LORD said, “I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.”⁵

We also see in God’s response that justice is integral to His goodness when God tells of His right to show mercy as He chooses. The act of showing mercy requires the presence of actions that justify punishment. Any permitting of the twisting of good to be evil without consequences issuing from God would impune His goodness. Goodness must hate evil and therefore punish evil. Because sin is evil, God’s goodness is shown in His just punishment of evil actions. If God did not show justice and punish evil then He could not be good.

God’s goodness isn’t restricted to the lofty and heady realms of glory and justice. His goodness is evident in many ordinary ways. His common grace extends to every sphere of life and reaches all of our senses—the crunch of leaves during a walk on a crisp fall day, the tang from the first sip of a robust cabernet, the initial peek at waves through dune grasses, the whiff of chocolate chip cookies cooling in the kitchen, the crush of a black velvet dress on a starlit night, the song of a bird on a winter morning, the warmth of mashed potatoes with gravy, the curve of a new mother’s breast, the fragrance from a bank of honeysuckle in bloom, the pudgy cheeks of a toddler—all of these things betray God’s righteous hedonism and romp under the umbrella of His ultimate goodness as a covenant-keeping King. This entire book could be devoted to describing His glorious goodness and it would not even begin to scratch the surface.

Our God is perfectly, immutably, essentially, primarily and necessarily good. As the infinite and unchanging initiator of good, goodness is inseparable from His nature. Certainly this divine attribute deserves our attention, reflection, and devotion to understanding it more and our energies spent in portraying it as a theme in our art.