

ASPECTS OF HUMAN RIGHTEOUSNESS

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Goodness has several aspects. In relation to a standard, goodness is humanly measurable behavior relative to the divine ideal—as to its “letter” and its “spirit.” As to the behavior, goodness is the overt behavior (which tends to correlate with what is humanly measurable) but the motive, attitude, and character—generalized pattern vs. specific act. As to the setting, goodness has a subjective and objective aspect. As to the kind of interpersonal behavior, there is morality, wisdom, and ministry. These dimensions of goodness are detailed under the headings below.

(1) Behavior relative to the humanly executable aspects of the Law of Moses. Paul evidently means the Law in this sense when he says of himself, “. . . *as to the righteousness that is of the Law—blameless*” (Philippians 3:6); otherwise, he would contradict the claim that “*there is none good but God*” (Luke 18:19) as well as his own claim that “*All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*” (Romans 3:23). The “humanly measurable” must refer to the more overt and quantitative aspects of Mosaism, because other people can judge and enforce them—what are actionable.

That corresponds with the first function of the Law of Moses—to serve as the constitution of a political entity, the Jewish state, which united church and state in a theocracy. Here we are looking at a humanly actionable aim of legislation.

Perfection in this respect is humanly attainable. But people cannot feel satisfied with living up to the Mosaic Law in that respect, that “*letter of the law*” approach. There is more to “*the righteousness of God*” than that, so the next category comes into play.

(2) Behavior relative to the divine ideals set forth in the Law of Moses. It is in this respect that Paul evidently refers to the commandment not to covet (Romans 7:7ff.). No human can know the motives behind another person’s behaviors that fall short of divine ideals.

Perfection in this second sense is not humanly attainable, and yet perfection is always required by any standard of behavior, legal (Deuteronomy 27:26) or interpersonal. The divinely measurable intent of the Law includes the heart; God knows our heart as well as our actions (Luke 16:16).

This second function of the Mosaic Law set God’s values for interpersonal relationship, including human-divine relationship. This is the guidance end of the legislation, the front end. Particularly in Mosaic legislation, there is a distinction between the guidance aim (ideal/values) and the executable aim, not only because one is attainable and the other one is not, but because the Mosaic Law was given by a holy God (Leviticus 19:2; cp. Galatians 3:21). Here is what Paul calls the “spirit” of the Law (2 Corinthians 3:6-11), but this is still not the whole picture, because the spirit of the Law deals with intent of the Law (see next entry). The ideals of the Law include such lofty unmeasurable matters as loving God and neighbor with all our heart, strength, and mind.

(a) Spirit vs. letter of the Law. The spirit of the Law (2 Corinthians 3:6-11) contrasts with the letter of the Law in both of the above dimensions. Here we are

concerned about the intent of statements in contrast to the strict wording. Here we face an additional linguistic issue, the nature of language, and then the hermeneutical endeavor.

(b) Overt and inner. Overt behavior contrasts with motive, attitude, and character of the person—intentions vs. performance. This aspect of the situation brings in an observation of the nature of people. Paul addresses this matter in Romans 7, where he pictures our plight under divine ideals aside from any qualifying considerations, aside from factors like grace/forgiveness in another to subjectively “make up for” the lack of full congruity between intention and fulfillment “in the sinner.” His ideals are better than his accomplishments. His own members, his “flesh,” get in the way of fulfilling his aspirations, intentions, ideals, which equal the real “me,” the inner self, the heart.

As an unsupplemented principle, **law** leads to actual and psychological separation from God (loneliness), personal frustration from goal achievement, and bondage to weakness. The **interpersonal factor** must come in to provide the grace of forgiveness by the other person to bridge the gap between accomplishment and aspiration (Romans 7), which is measured by conscience (Romans 2). Conscience, law, and interpersonal values are all perfectionist, but the interpersonal provides grace—which law does not—to relieve a conscience sensitized by those high ideals.

(3) Objective and subjective goodness. There are two ways to be righteous—objectively (actually) and subjectively (interpersonally). We could be righteous because (a) we always live up to expectancy, actual achievement, righteousness in theory. Paul speaks of it as “*a righteousness [that comes] out of [one’s circumstance under] law*” (Romans 10:5a; τὴν δικαιοσύνην τὴν ἐκ τοῦ νόμου). There is only our behavior and the standard for it (Romans 10:5b; ο ποιήσας αὐτὰ ἄνθρωπος ζήσεται ἐν αὐτοῖς). There is no other “source” of righteousness besides our own acts—no transfer from someone else’s acts and no someone else regarding us as what we are not. It is “*our own righteousness*” (Romans 10:3; τὴν ἰδίαν δικαιοσύνην), not our own standard of righteousness, but our own righteousness itself.

We can be righteous because (b) other people view us as righteous relative to shared values. That is practical righteousness, close enough for practical purposes—for friendship purposes, to grow and strengthen, to accomplish life’s goals. Paul labels this righteousness “a righteousness of God” (Romans 10:3²; τὴν τοῦ θεοῦ δικαιοσύνην). That righteousness is “of/from” other persons, a righteousness they regard us as having. They are being gracious to us, and we trust/believe/have-faith that they are willing to do that. They do so on conditions (repentance, *etc.*, which amount to aspects of identifying with them that we sinned against). We are not causing the result (relationship) by our own actions relative to the standard (works, earning, producing, merit, cause). It is a righteousness we “have” by trusting them to “give” it to us, to regard us as having it (as in “*I’ll give him that*”; condition). They reckon it to us, not because of our overt actions, but because of what they can tell from our overt actions about our inner self, our heart.

A person, especially a divine person, can read motive, attitude, heart, aspiration, and intentionality behind overt behavior. The subsequent repentant behavior does not change the erroneousness/failure/ungoodness of any past act, but it indicates the difference between the real self and the acting self, the past behavior and the present aspiration. So, the relationship can continue, being based on the real self rather than sheer actions; so relationship is more the point than behavior *per se*. The shared values of the

friendship do not have to have a one-to-one fit with the performance of the parties in it because repentance-forgiveness can overlook the difference between performance and perfection. It can overlook that difference because of the change after our behavior or because of the difference between our inner and overt self.

That change from the former condition by repentance plus forgiveness takes care of cases where the aspiring self did not come out where the achieving self ought to have arrived. (Romans 7:12ff. is probably not talking about the unconverted person so much as the converted one who—like all of us—cannot seem to pull off God’s intentions either.)

(4) Goodness relative to morality, wisdom, and ministry. A final aspect of goodness has to do with the difference between morality, wisdom, and ministry. These three categories are like concentric circles arranged respectively from small to large. Duty lines up with morality and ethics, and is based on divine eternal nature, purpose, and creation. Wisdom is based on the typical nature of things and deals with what is most likely to work. Ministry goes beyond both areas and tries to help improve the lot and life of others even when we have no responsibility for them. When we decide not to do a command about morality, we sin. When we decide not to take advice in wisdom, we take a risk. When we decide not to minister, we pass up an opportunity.