

“BEHOLD THE GOODNESS AND SEVERITY OF GOD”

“I don’t believe that God would send me to hell because I didn’t do everything He said. God knows my heart, and He just wants me to be happy.” This statement sums up the prevailing American religion. People generally believe in God, but only as long as God meets their definition of “good.” To them, “good” means unobtrusive, easygoing, flexible, non-judgmental, and infinitely forgiving. Yet God’s inspired word instructs, *“Behold therefore the goodness and severity of God: on them which fell, severity; but toward thee, goodness, if thou continue in his goodness: otherwise thou also shalt be cut off”* (Romans 11:22). There are two sides to God, both of which we need to behold—that is, we must see and take special note of both of them¹—if we are to understand and appreciate either the goodness or severity of God. Is God really severe? Many of us have grown up singing the precious words “Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” And indeed the Bible does say just that; repeatedly affirming the love of God to the entire world (John 3:16-17; Romans 5:8; 1 John 3:16; et al.). God is loving, gracious, and good. But not His love, grace, nor goodness precludes His severity. When the world had fallen completely into sin, the Lord said, *“I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth; both man, and beast, and the creeping thing, and the fowls of the air; for it repenteth me that I have made them”* (Genesis 6:5-7). And He did what He said He would; destroying the world, the animals, and all mankind save one family, *“Whereby the world that then was, being overflowed with water, perished”* (2 Peter 3:6). Shortly following their Divinely approved ordination as priests, *“Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it, put incense on it, and offered profane fire before the LORD, which He had not commanded them”* (Leviticus 10:1, New King James Version). As they offered their worship, Nadab and Abihu may have thought to themselves, “This is a truly great way to worship. No, God did not say to do it exactly this way. But He knows our hearts, and we just want to find exciting new ways to worship Him.” Regardless of their thoughts, God responded with swift severity: *“And there went out fire from the LORD, and devoured them, and they died before the LORD”* (Leviticus 10:2). God has always judged with severity. He destroyed the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah for their selfish and lustful sins; and they *“are set forth for an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire”* (Jude 7). When Korah and his compadres thought to take to themselves the authority that only God can give, *“...that the ground clave asunder that was under them: and the earth opened her mouth, and swallowed them up, and their houses, and all the men that appertained unto Korah, and all their goods. They, and all that appertained to them, went down alive into the pit, and the earth closed upon them: and they perished from among the congregation* (Numbers 16:31-33). God does not change (Malachi 3:6; James 1:17); and anyone who persists in rebellion will face the severity of His judgment. As God had prepared water to destroy the world by the Flood, *“the heavens and the earth, which are now, by the same word are kept in store, reserved unto fire against the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men”* (2 Peter 3:7).

How can such a severe God be good? To use “severe” as a one word description of God does not paint a complete picture of the perfect character of God. While we are to behold God’s severity, we are also to behold His beneficence, His kindness, His generosity—all part of His unmatched goodness.² Jesus noted that people are generally good toward their friends and family—but much less so toward strangers, and not at all toward their

enemies (Matthew 5:43, 46-47). But God is good toward all: *“He maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust”* (verse 45). Mankind’s unworthiness and unappreciation does not diminish God’s desire to be good to all mankind. Contrariwise, God makes every effort to be good to every man and woman, regardless of cost to Himself: *“For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us”* (Romans 5:7-8). God’s severity does not demean His goodness. God is absolutely just; that is, He is upright and fair (Psalm 145:17; Romans 9:14).³ He *“will render to every man according to his deeds”* (Romans 2:6). If we better understood the severity of sin, we could grasp why sin demands severe punishment (compare with Psalm 5:4- 5). In a sense, it could be said that God’s goodness demands His severity. That God is severe does not mean that He is excessive. While God does execute judgment strictly and punish intensely, He does not relish doing so (Ezekiel 33:11). God is not infinitely forgiving in the sense that He can forgive those who refuse to repent, but His forgiveness is limitless to those who do repent (Isaiah 55:7). What should be my response to the goodness and severity of God? One should not huffily reject God and His word because they do not conform to one’s own preconceived notions. *“Be not high-minded, but fear... take heed lest he also spare not thee”* (Romans 11:20-21). Neither should one’s response be to attack the Christian who faithfully proclaims God’s word (compare with Galatians 4:16). One’s response should be to love the truth, and to love the God who gave it (2 Thessalonians 2:10; John 17:17). One’s response should be to change his practices as one who appreciates the goodness and severity of God. *“Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness, Looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God, wherein the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat?”* (2 Peter 3:11-12). If we know that the judgment is coming, and that it may come at any moment, why would we live as though we are unconcerned about it? *“Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?”* (Romans 2:4). If we appreciate God’s goodness, why would we spurn His word? We cannot use His goodness as a crutch to allow ourselves to live wickedly. God indeed knows our hearts; and the truth is, one who does not obey God does not love him! (1 John 5:3).

Conclusion: America, and the world, has formed God into the image it desires (compare with Romans 1:22-23). In the minds of many, God is not much different from Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny: soft and cuddly, and according to one’s own imagination. However, there are two sides of God to behold. God is severe—He will judge the world through His Son, and will punish appropriately. And God is good—He has provided for all the means of pardon for the Judgment, at priceless sacrifice to Himself. How are you going to respond to the goodness and severity of God?

¹ *“eidon,”* in Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: Univ. Of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 279.

² *“chreestotees,”* BDAG, p. 1090.

³ *“dikaios,”* BDAG, p. 246.