

# CHASING GOOD

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Daily, we are challenged to see and appreciate the good in the world around us. Persistent news of violent crimes, wars, rebellions, corruption, lies, and more lies threaten to dampen the celebration of Christmas, no matter how great a deal you may have found on Black Friday.

*Where is the good?*

There were six days of creation, each crowned with God's verdict: "It is good."

God rested the seventh day, but He has not rested again since then. Jesus said, "*My Father is working until now, and I, too, am working.*" (John 5:17)

God is still doing good things. And He loves to do them through people like you and me.

And we are looking forward to a similar verdict, when we meet Jesus face to face. We hope to hear Him say, "*Well done, good and faithful servant.*"

But that verdict, that classification—good—may not be what you think it is.

Everybody is chasing what seems "good" to them, what they hope will be "good" for them. And many of us are also hoping that God will agree.

However, trying to please God with our behavior is a losing battle. We can never tell if it was "good enough," or if we did "enough good" to satisfy what we think He expects. We always end up with the short straw, discouraged by guilt and regret and uncertainty.

## **What is "good"?**

Permit me to share a brief lesson in Biblical ethics.

God made the world. And God made humankind. He did not make us to be alone, but to be in fellowship with Himself, our Creator, and with one another. God interacting with humans and humans interacting with God is what makes life full and fulfilling. And that's where "goodness" comes in.

Biblically, good is NOT simply an act that *pleases* someone. Nor even an act that *benefits* someone else. Pleasantness is an emotional value, but goodness is a moral value that may or may not be pleasing.

I am certain that you have faced choices of doing the right thing, when it would not be fun or easy or comfortable or convenient or pleasing. Just right.

They called Jesus, "Good master." And He asked them, "*Why do you call me 'good'? Only God is truly good.*" (Mark 10:18) "Good Master," in that case, was simply an expression of courtesy (and perhaps a merely superficial gesture of flattery).

Was Jesus telling the truth when He said that "only God is truly good," or was that an oversimplification?

If that is really true, then it is easy to understand why God looked at the heavens and the earth that He had made and called them "good." *Because He alone is good and HE made it.* God Himself is the measure of what is intrinsically "good."

But that suggests that you or I cannot do good things like God did. What God has made is good. What we make of it on our own is not good, even if it is pleasing to us. Isn't that why the Bible says, "There is none righteous; there is no one who does good, not even one"?

But haven't we all done things that we consider "good"?

You see, we use two standards for measuring goodness, and sometimes we confuse them. Most common is the measuring we do among ourselves: Does it seem good to me? Is it good for you? This is normal, natural, and simply human. It is the value of "good" in human-to-human relations, in the *short term*, and it is our cultural standard.

But the New Testament introduces a NEW STANDARD of measurement, a Biblical standard.

*Acts 13:2* *One day as these men were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Dedicate Barnabas and Saul for the special work to which I have called them." <sup>3</sup> So after more fasting and prayer, the men laid their hands on them and sent them on their way.*

*Acts 15:28* *"For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay no greater burden on you than these few requirements:*

The New Testament standard of measurement is this: Is it good to the Holy Spirit *and* to us? We can no longer simply ask, "Does it feel good to me, or to us?" Or, "Does it benefit someone in the short run?" Or, "Does society approve?"

We must also ask, “Holy Spirit, does it seem good to You, too? Does it fit with Your plans? Does it express the character of Christ? Does it advance Your Kingdom on the earth? Does it have eternal value?” This is the value of “good” in God + human relations. And God + human relationship is what we have been made for.

It was from this perspective, that God pronounced all that He had made on the earth to be “good.” It fit with His plans. It expressed the character of Christ. It advanced His Kingdom on the earth. And it laid the groundwork for eternal values.

From this perspective, “good” is not merely a *resultant* quality (that is, not the result of something you have done, or a quality that can only be measured *after* the fact), but essentially a *motivational* quality (the purpose for which you do a thing, the quality of your motive *before* any action is taken).

This is not about motive alone, as in “Well, it’s the thought that counts” (something we may say when our “good” intention never gained enough traction to become an achievement). This is about motive *plus* action—but an action whose shape is determined by the motivation from which it sprung.

In this God-plus-human arena of life, it is possible to do a “good” thing (“good” from a merely human perspective) in a wrong way (without the Holy Spirit’s prompting or approval), and have it end up as a bad thing (creating a rift in our fellowship with God), even if someone else is pleased with what you did. The Bible offers many illustrations of such scenarios for our instruction.

And it is equally possible to do a “bad” thing (from a merely human perspective) in a right way (with the Holy Spirit’s prompting and approval) and have it end up as a good thing (enhancing our fellowship with God), even if someone else is displeased. The offers many of these illustrations, too (especially of Jesus and His disciples violating the Pharisees’ ideas of what was “right” and “good”).

But when God pronounces a thing is “good,” you may rest assured that it is indeed good. Unusually good. Profoundly good.

For instance...

### **It is good to give thanks to the Lord.**

*Psalm 92:1 It is good to give thanks to the Lord, to sing praises to the Most High.*

<sup>2</sup> *It is good to proclaim Your unfailing love in the morning, Your faithfulness in the evening*

Thanksgiving is not just a day on the American calendar. Real thanksgiving is the overflow of a heart filled with love—love *from* God and love *for* God.

The Latin root of the word *gratitude* is *grata* or *gratia*—a given gift—and from this same root we get our word *grace*, which means a gift freely given that is unearned.

### **Why is it good?**

Not simply for what it produces, but primarily for what it *expresses*. It expresses a healthy relationship. A humble relationship. A trusting relationship. A vital relationship.

Does it also *produce* something good? Yes! A more joyous relationship. A more fruitful relationship.

The expression of gratitude is the glue that consistently holds society and relationships together; its opposite—ingratitude—contributes to the separation and dissolution of society.

After all, giving thanks and expressing appreciation for the blessings and gifts of life is a natural human response. Gratitude is a feeling that spontaneously emerges from within. However, it is not simply an emotional response; it is also a choice we make.

And secular (non-religious) scientific studies have found that expressing gratitude is good for us in at least six significant ways:

1. Gratitude makes us happier.

Studies show that even 5 minutes a day spent in thoughtful gratitude has a major impact on one's overall outlook and attitude.

2. Gratitude makes people like us.

It generates social capital. Helps make more friends, improves existing relationships.

3. Gratitude makes us healthier.

It may even extend your lifespan. Here's a chart that records the results of various secular scientific studies:

Results1	Study	Date
Keeping a gratitude journal caused participants to report <b>16% fewer physical symptoms, 19% more time spent exercising, 10% less physical pain, 8% more sleep, and 25% increased sleep quality.</b>	Counting Blessings Versus Burdens	2003
The emotions of appreciation and gratitude shown to <b>induce the relaxation response.</b>	The Grateful Heart	2004
A gratitude visit <b>reduced depressive symptoms by 35% for several weeks;</b> a gratitude journal <b>lowered depressive symptoms by 30%+ for as long as the practice was continued.</b>	Positive Psychology Progress	2005
Patients with hypertension were instructed to count their blessings once a week. There was a <b>significant decrease in their systolic blood pressure.</b>	Gratitude: Effects on Perspectives and Blood Pressure	2007
Gratitude correlated with <b>improved sleep quality (r = .29), less time required to fall asleep (r = .20), and increased sleep duration (r = .14).</b>	Gratitude Influences Sleep Through the Mechanism of Pre-Sleep Cognitions	2009
Levels of gratitude significantly correlated with <b>vitality and energy.</b>	Multiple Studies	Many

#### 4. Gratitude boosts our career.

It increases productivity and decision-making capabilities, helps you network, and makes you a more effective manager.

#### 5. Gratitude strengthens our emotions.

It reduces envy and increases resilience.

#### 6. Gratitude develops our personality.

It can make you more optimistic, less materialistic, more spiritual, less self-centered, and give you more self-esteem.

The practice of gratitude is a massively underutilized tool for improving life-satisfaction and happiness!

Then, why is it difficult? Because you can't always get what you want. And when we don't, it's harder to be grateful. Too often, we are so focused on what we want but don't have, that we can't see how much we do have for which we should be grateful.

Why is it so often superficial? Our circumstances may be contrary to our desires. This tends to breed impatience instead of thanksgiving. If we do express thanks, it may be shallow or insincere.

Why are we inconsistent in giving God thanks? Our pride gets in the way. Perhaps we are embarrassed by being on the receiving end again..

Consider (and be prepared to face) these enemies of gratitude: grumbling, complaining, murmuring, backbiting, whining, slandering. (These are not just alternates, they are ENEMIES; when embraced, they will kill your sense of gratitude and they will wear you down.)

I hope you are asking yourself by now, “How can I improve?”

Decide to trust God and reject anxiety.

*Philippians 4:6* Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank Him for all He has done. <sup>7</sup> Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.

Decide to obey God and pray about everything.

“Live in Christ Jesus” is code for “Tell God what you need, and thank Him for all He has done.” That is how you live in Christ Jesus.

### **When should you give God thanks?**

Whenever it's appropriate (when God deserves it). Therefore, in every situation and at all times!

*Ephesians 5:20* Give thanks for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And as we practice thankfulness toward God, it will inevitably overflow to those around us, too.

*1 Timothy 4:4* Since everything God created is good, we should not reject any of it but receive it with thanks. <sup>5</sup> For we know it is made acceptable by the word of God and prayer.

*Psalm 107:1* Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good! His faithful love endures forever. <sup>2</sup> Has the Lord redeemed you? Then speak out!

It is good to give thanks to the Lord.

It is really good.