

“Goodness (Human)”
Dictionary of the Apostolic Church, Vol. I:470-471. [1915]

Two applications go side by side in the general usage of the word “goodness” and are also found in the NT. On the one hand, it denotes an inherent quality without regard to its effect; on the other hand, the “goodness” is predicated in view of the effect. In the latter case, however, the thought of the inherent quality as producing the effect is never quite absent from the field of consciousness. It is not possible to call either of these two uses the older and more original one and to stamp the other as secondary and developed. Already in Homer (*Odyssey* 15:324, *Iliad* 13:284) *αγαθος* occurs of inherent quality as a designation of the well-born class, as distinguished from the common people (cf. our “better class,” “aristocracy”). When these are at the same time called *αγαθοι* in the sense of “brave,” this but shows the close connection between the inherent and the transient reference of the word. Bravery is the goodness of the aristocracy in action. Hence in the frequent sense of “efficient,” “adequate,” the adjective does not describe a momentary or spasmodic efficiency, but the habitual one of quality. Good objects, good circumstances, “goods,” in the sense of wealth or of delicacies, are all so designated because of their inherent adaptation to benefit the owner or receiver. The force of the word in such connections can perhaps be felt best from the opposite *πονηρος*. Both meanings are transferred to the moral sphere. The ethical use of the word is, however, in profane Greek a comparatively late development, not being frequent until the philosophical writers (e.g. Plato).

In the NT both the sub-ethical and the ethical use are represented. For the former see Matt. 7:17, Luke 1:53, 8:8, 12:18-19, 16:25, Rom. 8:28, 10:15, 13:4, Gal. 6:6, Heb. 9:11, James 1:17, 1 Pet. 3:10. For the latter, used of persons, see Matt. 5:45, 12:34, 19:16-17, 20:15, Mark 10:18, Luke 18:19, 23:50, John 7:12, Acts 11:24, Rom. 5:7, Titus 2:5; of things, Matt. 12:34-35, 19:16, Luke 8:15, 10:42, John 5:29, Acts 23:1, Rom. 2:10, 7:13, 18, 19, 9:11, 12:9, 21, 13:3, 14:16, 16:19, 2 Cor. 5:10, Eph. 4:29, 6:8, 1 Thess. 3:6, 5:15, 2 Thess. 2:17, 1 Tim. 1:5, 19, Titus 2:10, 1 Pet. 3:11, 13, 16, and frequently in the formula “good works.”

It will be observed that the ascription of goodness to persons is rare in the NT. The reason for this is not to be sought in the biblical doctrine of sin as excluding human goodness, for on that view the affirmation of goodness with reference to works ought to be equally rare, which is not the case. The true explanation seems to lie in the God-centered estimate which Scripture places upon man’s moral character. Man is measured with strict reference to the nature and will of God as his norm. The conception of “goodness,” while not excluding and even presupposing, an objective standard of this kind, does not in itself express it. It describes the quality either as inherent or as affecting others, but does not explicitly relate it to God. This the word *δικαιος* does, for *δικαιοσυνη* means goodness as conformity to the Law of God and as approved by the Divine judgment. The full and positive conception of *δικαιοσυνη* therefore covers all that is *αγαθος* and adds to this the God-related element just named. It is not at variance with this that *δικαιος* occasionally occurs in a negative sense, more closely adhering to the profane and popular usage — a sense which places it below *αγαθος* in the ethical scale. Thus in Rom. 5:7 the *δικαιος* (“righteous”) is one who merely is free from fault, who does what in the ordinary relations of life can be required of him, but does not go beyond this to the spontaneous exercise of virtue as the *αγαθος* does. The term “good” is reserved for the latter. But as a rule *δικαιος* is not less comprehensive than *αγαθος*, covering the Divine demand in all its reach (Rom. 3:10).

In the ethical application the inherent and the beneficent sense lie so close together that it is not always easy to determine which stands in the foreground and which is the mere concomitant of thought. In the Hebrew **טוֹב**, as used of God, both meanings are present, but the sense of beneficence preponderates (cf. Ps. 34:9). In regard to Matt. 19:17 (= Mark 10:18, Luke 18:19), usually understood as raising the question of absolute ethical perfection, G. Dalman (*Die Worte Jesu*, 1898, 1: 277) advocates the same meaning of beneficence. Among the passages which refer to human persons Rom. 5:7 not only extends the reach of “goodness” beyond that of “righteousness,” but also finds this overlapping in the spontaneous, benevolent character of the former. In Luke 23:50 the same distinction may be found, although here the sequence shows that the righteousness before God is estimated higher than the mere benevolence towards men. In 1 Pet. 2:18 the “good” and “gentle” masters are so described from the point of view of their treatment of servants rather than of inherent quality. In John 7:12 there is some doubt as to whether “a good man” (in opposition to one who “deceiveth the people”) means a man of good character or one of good influence. Acts 11:24 and Titus 2:5 seem to be the only clear instances of the use of the word to describe inherent goodness.

The same difficulty recurs where the predicate applies not to persons but to things in the ethical sphere. The “good things” and the “evil things” spoken of in Matt. 12:34-35 are, of course, in themselves morally right or wrong, yet in the context the reference is to blasphemy, so that the element of the good or bad intent and effect can scarcely be excluded. When St. Paul in Rom. 7:12 says that the commandment is *αγια και δικαια και αγαθη*, the inherent perfection of the Law is affirmed not only by the first and second but also by the third attribute; still the ensuing question, “Was then that which is good made death unto me?” proves that “the good” is felt as that which has naturally combined with it a good effect. The same thought must be present in Rom. 12:21. The “good” of the neighbor which is to be promoted according to Rom. 15:2 is his ethical good (“unto edification”), but it is in part so called because it promotes his spiritual welfare. In Eph. 6:8 the element of profitableness is plainly indicated by the context (cf. ver. 7). The “good work” which God began in the Philippians (Phi. 1:6) is good primarily because it has a beneficent, saving purpose, but probably the notion that it is productive of what is inherently good in them is also present. In Philemon 14 (cf. ver. 6) the AV renders *το αγαθον σου* correctly by “thy benefit” (RV “thy goodness”). The context decides in favor of “beneficent” in 1 Pet. 3:13 (cf. ver. 11 and 3 John 11). “A good conscience” (Acts 23:1, 1 Tim. 1:19, 1 Pet. 3:21) is a conscience deriving its quality from its content, and therefore presupposes that the acts approved by it are good in themselves. The phrase “good works” admits equally well of both interpretations. There can be no doubt that in Acts 9:36, Rom. 13:3, 2 Cor. 9:8, 1 Tim. 2:10, 5:10, 2 Tim. 2:21, 3:17, Titus 1:16, 3:1 the reference is mainly to the good intent and effect of the deed. In other passages, however, like Rom. 2:10, Eph. 2:10, Col. 1:10, 2 Thess. 2:17, the emphasis seems to rest not on the outward beneficent tendency, but on the inherent good character of the work, as conformable to the Divine Law.

The Jewish usage of the conception favors this, for in it not the helpfulness, but the meritoriousness, the religious significance of the observance of the Law, stand in the foreground. While St. Paul denies, of course, the meritoriousness of good works as a ground of justification, he nevertheless is at one with Judaism in emphasizing their specific religious importance. It is not in harmony with the Pauline teaching to deem of importance only the spirit and intent of the deed, and not its external performance. Such a judgment is possible only where the ethical point of view is man-centered and virtue regarded as completed in itself. St. Paul’s point of view is God-centered – the virtue, the

disposition exist for the sake of God; and in order that they may accrue to the full glory of God, it is necessary that they shall issue into act. For the reality of the good work the presence of the disposition behind it is indispensable, but it is no less true that, for the completion of the good as it exists in the heart, its embodiment in the good work is essential.

The noun *αγαθωσυνη* (Rom. 15:14, Gal. 5:22, Eph. 5:9, 2 Thess. 1:11 – not in classical Greek, but only in the Greek translations of the OT and in St. Paul) probably in each case describes that form of goodness which seeks the benefit of others. In Gal. 5:22, standing among a number of other virtues, it must have this specialized sense. This is favored also by the connection in Rom. 15:14 (“able to admonish one another”). In Eph. 5:9 there is at least nothing to contradict this meaning. In 2 Thess. 1:11, “Our God . . . may fulfill every desire of goodness and every work of faith with power,” the desire and the work stand related as the wish and the execution, which secures for *αγαθωσυνη* here likewise the same sense of beneficence as is associated with the “work of faith.” *αγαθωσυνη* then differs from *αγαθοτης* (likewise a word of the later Greek) as *benevolentia* does from *bonitas*.