

Is Man Fundamentally Good? by Geoffrey Bingham

INTRODUCTION: IS MAN, ON THE WHOLE, FUNDAMENTALLY GOOD?

There are many ways of looking at this question. Where we live—our environment; what we experience—our circumstances; how we have been trained in life—our conditioning factors; all these determine the conclusions to which we come. If we were undergoing torture for our faith and culture, then we might conclude other persons were fundamentally bad. If we were torturing others because of our ideology, we might think they were bad and ourselves good. Many things determine our perceptions, but we need something more reliable than our perceptions.

For us, the Scriptures determine what we are to understand about humanity. Shortly we will look at what they say about created Man—without sin; about fallen Man—steeped in sin; and about redeemed Man—freed from sin’s power, but nevertheless battling with it.

Whatever our study may bring forth, it is clear that human beings have differing ideas about the goodness and badness of Man. They follow something like this:

First Idea: ‘Man was good until the Fall, then he lost his original righteousness, so that even his seeming good works are as filthy rags (cf. Isa. 64:6), he has no good thing in him (cf. Rom. 7:18), and the works of the law, which he tries to fulfil in order to be justified, are impossible for him to do so that he can achieve salvation (cf. Gal. 2:16; 3:10). We conclude that fallen Man is essentially not good.’

Second Idea: ‘It is true that Man is fallen and is a sinner, and often sins horribly, but then the human race, on the whole, does good—even if much of it is relatively sinful. See the idea that the man in Proverbs 30:1–4 speaks about on the high order of human beings. He could not praise humanity in this way if it were not good:

The words of Agur son of Jakeh of Massa. The man says to Ithiel, to Ithiel and Ucal: Surely I am too stupid to be a man. I have not the understanding of a man. I have not learned wisdom, nor have I knowledge of the Holy One. Who has ascended to heaven and come down? Who has gathered the wind in his fists? Who has wrapped up the waters in a garment? Who has established all the ends of the earth? What is his name, and what is his son’s name? Surely you know!

Whilst man does terrible things, yet on the whole, he sets about to do good. His bad deeds are a pity, but this does not mean that Man is essentially bad.’

Third Idea (Pelagian and Arminian): ‘Man is essentially good. He is made in the image of God and is structured to do good. Doing evil “goes against the grain”, for the grain is for doing good. He enters life without inheriting Adam’s sin, which was, after all, Adam’s sin and not ours. He has a clean sheet, and even though he often blots this sheet, the sheet, on the whole, is clean. He is inclined to imitate others, and in this sense he follows others so that he cannot be wholly responsible for being taught wrongly when he follows bad examples. God forgives such for He knows they are not perfect, and He is a gracious God.’

There are many other ideas: one of them being humanism, which starts off on the basis

that Man is good, and that he has all moral power to be good, were he to know he is good, and capable of always remaining good. For the rest, we find approaches to the nature of Man which are even a mixture of all the three ideas set out above. Generally people say, ‘Given the right environment, the right circumstances and good training, human beings on the whole can be reasonably good, though they never reach perfection’

IS MAN ESSENTIALLY GOOD?

It is clear from the biblical account that Man was created in the image of God, and, in union with God—that is, before the Fall—he was a good-living being. His genuine goodness depended upon his being obedient to the word which God spoke. Seeing Man was created by that very word, it behoved him to be obedient. Obedience, at heart, is a matter of true relationships with God and Man. Sin is a matter of wrong relationships with God and Man. When he rejected the word of God in favour of the word of the serpent (Gen. 3:1–6), Man was a being who broke relationship—especially covenant relationship—with God. He was no longer relationally dependent upon God. He thought that he *of himself* could discern between good and evil.

In Romans 5:12–21 Paul shows that Adam brought sin and death to the human race. In his writings, he shows that all in Adam are basically disobedient to God and that death will come to all. Can we see any *essential* goodness in what Man became by the Fall?

Even so (which some Christians say, much after the manner of both the Second and Third Ideas above), ‘Surely humanity on the whole disapproves of evil works, and commends those which are good. The world is not just a seething mass of evil, but rather it is generally good, so that folk are generally good.’ At first sight this seems to be a reasonable statement, but it is also interesting to see how critical human beings generally are of most other (if not all) human beings. God is Judge, but we wish to be judges, since we (think we) know good and evil. We distrust the judgment of others who do not agree with us. God should be as easygoing as we are, or as severe. Few human beings trust other human beings. Our systems are built to protect ourselves as much as possible from the evil of other human beings. We must have some idea of what goodness is, or we would not have ethics and laws. It is not that we necessarily delight in these laws and ethics, but we are glad they are there, especially when we derive benefit from them.

We could continue in this vein forever, debating the matter and getting nowhere. In order to get somewhere let us look for some moments at what theologians and jurists have called ‘Natural Law’.

NATURAL LAW

The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary describes natural law as ‘Of law and justice. Based upon the innate moral feelings of mankind; instinctively felt to be right and fair’. This description seems valid. It would seem to cover a humanity which has a general knowledge of law—whether it be called ‘God’s law’ or simply ‘universal law’. The burning question is not whether humanity has a sense of law, but whether it obeys the

law it senses. *Knowing* law and *obeying* law constitutes being ‘reasonably good’. But do we obey what we believe we know? We remember Paul’s conflict in Romans 7:15: ‘I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate’. He discovered that—*of himself*—he could not obey the law, or desist from doing wrong. This is a shock to the man who thinks he is essentially good.

Martin Luther was sure there is such a thing as ‘natural law’. In his lectures on the Book of Galatians, he wrote:

Therefore, there is one law which runs through all ages, is known to all men, is written in the hearts of all people, and leaves no one from beginning to end with an excuse, although for the Jews ceremonies were added and the other nations had their laws, which were not binding upon the whole world, but only this one, which the Holy Spirit dictates unceasingly in the hearts of all.

It is an interesting fact, that when the Nuremburg War Trials took place, there had to be some kind of resolution of the varying views of law by the many nations and cultures taking part in the Trials. The Chief Prosecutor for the French Republic, M. Francois de Menthon, said:

There can be no well-balanced and enduring nation without a common consent in the essential rules of social living, without a general standard of behaviour before the claims of conscience, without the adherence of all citizens to identical concepts of good and evil.¹

It is especially interesting in this case that the fact and value of conscience is taken for granted, as indeed is the idea of ‘identical concepts of good and evil’. Another view of natural law would be that cultures and tribes do not so much come to their laws by observing and reasoning—though that may be so in some cases—as that there is an inner ontological pressure on them to observe the law of God, innate in Man from creation, so that their laws—whatever the matter of their formation—seem to take the shape of what we call ‘moral law’.

MAN IN THE FACE OF NATURAL AND MORAL LAW

So far we have to agree that Man has a *knowledge* of law, but that does not make him good. That is, law does not have the power to make those who know it either *inclined* to do it, or *able* to do it. This is made clear in a close study of Romans 8:1–3, where the law is shown unable to assist us to obey it. We have pointed to Paul’s experience in Romans 7:13–25: even though he desires to obey he cannot. Even as a justified person he was unable, *of himself*, to obey the law perfectly—though he desired intensely to do so. In Romans 3:19–20 Paul observes: ‘Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For no human being will be justified in his sight by works of the law, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.’

Paul is saying that the law brings all human beings to guilt before God. Prior to this conclusion, he has dealt with the seeming righteousness of the Jews. He then says that all have sinned, whether Jews or Gentiles. So then, we are now free to enquire into the heart of Man—mankind generally, we would say. To do this we have to rely on the Scriptures.

¹ Quoted in Helmut Thielicke, *Foundations, Theological Ethics*, vol. 1 (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1966), p. 386.

THE INNER NATURE OF FALLEN MAN

Christ was the one, who alone of all human beings, was able to state the heart of man, because he was not involved in sin. In John 2:23–25 he does not even trust those who were said to have believed on him because of his miracles, ‘Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs which he did; but Jesus did not trust himself to them, because he knew all men and needed no one to bear witness of man; for he himself knew what was in man’. This is a terrifying passage with deep implications for us all. He would not trust one of us. His statement in Mark 7:20–23 certainly shows man as sinful, ‘And he said, “What comes out of a man is what defiles a man. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a man.”’

I have purposely quoted Christ and his statements in the New Testament for obvious reasons. If I had quoted from Genesis, it might have been argued that that was a primitive time for Man, when that sort of thing happened and things are different now: Man has progressed. But *are* things different now? Two quotes, from Genesis 6:5 and 8:21, show God’s mind about Man:

The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.

And when the LORD smelled the pleasing odor, the LORD said in his heart, ‘I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth; neither will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done.’

There are other Old Testament references, such as Ecclesiastes 7:29 and Jeremiah 17:9:

Behold, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many devices.

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt; who can understand it?

When Jesus met the rich young ruler, who addressed him as ‘Good Master’, Jesus rebuked him by asking, ‘Why do you call me good? There is none good but God.’ Jesus had in mind what Paul quoted in Romans 3:12: ‘No one does good, not even one’, for Paul quoted from the Old Testament. Indeed, it would be good to quote Romans 3:9–18 as a whole:

What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all; for I have already charged that all men, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin, as it is written:

‘None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands, no one seeks for God. All have turned aside, together they have gone wrong; no one does good, not even one. Their throat is an open grave, they use their tongues to deceive. The venom of asps is under their lips. Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood, in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they do not know. There is no fear of God before their eyes.’

Paul is speaking of all humanity here, for he is about to say ‘all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God’. So no one escapes this statement of universal sinning, just as Romans 5:12 states that all sinned originally in Adam, ‘Therefore as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because *all men sinned*’.

SOME ANSWERS TO THE QUESTION, 'IS MAN FUNDAMENTALLY GOOD?'

It has been good to face this question, for we see that when Jesus said, 'If you *being evil* know how to give good gifts to your children', he affirmed the fact that fathers know what is good for their children. But that does not mean they are good, for indeed they are not. This knowing what is good, then, is written into God's law, and it seems to be present even in natural law. Conscience commands fathers to act well towards their children. Yet such persons have been described as 'evil'!

Surely our conclusion is that knowing the law, whether natural, or cultural, or as the moral law of God, does not make a person good. Only obedience to that law, and obedience in the right power and motive, is valid. Fallen Man, *of himself*, has neither genuine desire nor ability to be good, that is, to obey the law.

If that is the case, then why does Man feel he should obey law? The answer lies in his conscience. Shakespeare said, 'Conscience doth make cowards of us all'. Knowing the good we should do, we then feel afraid of judgment if we do not do it. Reformed theologians often spoke of 'general grace'. They meant that grace of God which holds the world in check from going to the evil of which it is capable. That same grace assists Man to obey the law, so that total evil is restrained, but it does not mean mankind follows the law of love. In some sense general grace keeps us from being totally devilish, whilst yet being human. If we think that the world lives naturally with a bent towards what is good, then we are mistaken. We have seen that human beings are not trustworthy without the true knowledge of God.

PAUL'S VIEW OF MAN'S EVIL AND GOD'S MERCY

In Romans 5:12–21 we saw that when Man sinned in Adam that he was brought into the midst of sin and death. Why then does he seem to be good when he is not? Hebrews 3:13 tells us: 'But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today", that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin'. The writer is telling us that sin has its own deceit. Sin persuades us that sin does not matter. Even so, there is a fear of death—which is fear of judgment—and it is this which makes life painful, for (as the same writer tells us), men and women, through fear of death, are in lifelong bondage to Satan. Paul takes up the same story in Ephesians 2:1–3:

And you he made alive, when you were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now *at work* in the sons of disobedience. Among these we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of body and mind, and so we were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

Paul is obviously including all human beings in this survey. He is saying that the serpent who deceived the first couple has his hold on humanity, and that now he 'energises' within them, driving them from evil to evil. Paul goes against the idea that Man is fundamentally good.

Paul then goes on to say, in verses that follow the quote above, that (i) God is rich in mercy; and (ii) out of His great love with which He loved us, He saved us. Do we understand, then, that if we minimise our sinfulness we all but do away with His rich mercy? We make it to be ordinary, flat and plain. If we claim that Man is good, then we fail to see the love and grace of the Cross which, in fact, was indispensable to save us.

Could it be that our proud spirits rebel against the idea that there had to be a Cross to save us, and that is why we minimise sin?

If, on the other hand we recognise (and what the revelation of Scripture teaches us) that Man has fallen, and does evil because his heart is corrupt (Jer. 17:9), then we see how sweet and blessed is the grace of God, and His mercy in rescuing us. We saw from Romans 3:9–18 that Man does not do good, but then Romans 3:24–25 tells us the good news that, ‘they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation to be received by faith’.

So then, the Gospel is ‘Good news for bad men, and bad news for good men’, that is, it is good news for those who recognise they are not good, but bad news for those who deceive themselves into thinking they are good. ‘There is none good but God.’

OUR CONCLUSION TO THE QUESTION

Surely our conclusion is that, generally speaking, looking out on the world and humanity, it does not seem to be too bad in its life and morals. It appears to know law in general, though it is what we call ‘Natural law’. Even so, it does not appear to be occupied with doing hideous evil. On the whole humanity is ‘decent’. Yet, as our eyes are opened by the revelation of Scripture, we see that this is not the true story. We might build up a terrible case against so-called ‘good’ humanity—what with the dreadful wars, Man’s inhumanity to man, the selfishness and greed he shows, and the pitiless cruelty he does, yet only God can show the corruption of Man’s heart. It is here we see what we mentioned earlier in this article, that sin is not just a matter of bad or evil deeds—sin is a matter of relationships. We do not just sin a sin: we sin against someone—against God, or Man, or ourselves.

Evil as Man may be, God’s love surmounts all this evil. God made Man in His own image and He determined even before creation to redeem Man by the Cross. He determined that His own Son should become a human being and rescue Man, and bring him to love and to goodness and to good works. It is fitting then that we show the love, mercy and grace of God, as Paul relates it in Ephesians 2:8–10, for it tells the whole story:

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God—not because of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

We note that this grace and love of God has worked even from Man’s time in the fall he had in Eden. The two first sons of Adam show us that (i) Cain was a sinner and did evil; and (ii) Abel was likewise a sinner but through grace was made to be a good man, a righteous man, genuinely doing good works by the grace of God, and a man who loved his brother. We can take heart, then, that all persons of faith have known the active love of God in their lives, and all stubborn sinners resist the grace and love God has ever had for them. When, by the Holy Spirit, the heart is convicted of sin, and God’s love is seen in the gospel, then—and only then—men and women can be saved from sin, be justified and transformed, and the doers of genuine good works.