

Making Biblical Decisions

Lesson 8

The Existential Perspective:
Being Good

Manuscript



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Lesson Eight

The Existential Perspective: Being Good

INTRODUCTION

During the Middle Ages, philosophers and scientists sometimes engaged in a practice called “alchemy.” This was an attempt to turn inexpensive metals, such as lead, into valuable metals, like gold. Of course, the alchemists knew that lead could be disguised to look like gold, or mixed with other substances to resemble gold. But they also knew that in order for lead truly to have the qualities of gold, its fundamental nature would have to be changed. It would actually have to become gold.

Well, something like this is true of people as well. Our words, thoughts and deeds are inseparably related to our fundamental nature. So, just as lead cannot truly have the properties of gold, people with corrupt natures cannot produce works that are truly good. Our actions always reflect our being.

This is the eighth lesson in our series *Making Biblical Decisions*, and we’ve entitled it “The Existential Perspective: Being Good.” In this lesson, we’ll begin our exploration of the existential perspective by looking at the relationship between goodness and who we are — our being. As you’ll recall, in these lessons our model for making biblical decisions has been that ethical judgment involves:

the application of God’s Word to a situation by a person

This model emphasizes three essential aspects of every ethical question: God’s Word, the situation, and the person making the decision. These three aspects of ethical judgment correspond to the three perspectives we’ve taken toward ethical issues throughout these lessons. The normative perspective emphasizes God’s Word and asks questions like “What do God’s norms reveal about our duty?” The situational perspective focuses on facts, goals and means in ethics, and asks questions like “How can we reach goals that please God?” The existential perspective centers on the persons that make ethical decisions. It poses questions like “How must we change in order to please God?” and “What kind of people please him?” We’ll focus on this existential perspective for the remaining lessons in this series.

As we mentioned in an earlier lesson, the term “existential” has been used in different ways by various philosophers. But in these lessons, we’ll use the term to refer to the human aspects of ethical questions. So, under the heading of the existential perspective, we’ll focus on issues like our character, our nature, and the kinds of people we are and ought to be.

In this lesson in particular, we’ll be concerned with what it means for a person to be good. We all know that even the worst criminals sometimes do things that are good. But it is quite another thing for a person to *be* good. Being good has more to do with our identities, commitments and motivations — the kinds of things the Bible describes as a person’s heart.

In this lesson on being good, we'll explore the relationship between "being" and "goodness" in terms of the three basic stages of biblical history. First, we'll discuss the period of creation, looking at God's own goodness, and at the fact that human beings were inherently good when God first created us. Second, we'll turn to the period of the Fall, exploring the way sin damaged humanity's goodness. And third, we'll speak of the period of redemption, when God restores those who are faithful to him and empowers them for goodness. Let's begin with creation.

CREATION

Our discussion of goodness at the time of creation will divide into two parts. First, we'll speak of God and his goodness, explaining the fact that all true moral goodness is rooted in God himself. And second, we'll describe how God created humanity to reflect his goodness. Let's look at the personal goodness of God.

GOD

God himself is the basis of morality. What makes stealing so wrong? Because God gives. What makes lying wrong? Because God is truth. So, what we know as morality, what humans know as morality is based on the very nature of God... So, there's no moral law for him. There's nothing that tells God what to do. Instead, what we know as right and wrong is based on who he is.

— Dr. Chris Lohrstorfer

As we explore the idea that goodness is rooted in God, we'll begin by focusing on God's being, looking particularly at his character. And next, we'll focus on a specific aspect of his character, namely his moral goodness. We'll start with a brief discussion of God's being.

Being

There are countless things that the Scriptures say about God's being, but for our purposes we'll focus on the relationship between his being and his essential attributes. Our Trinitarian God exists in three persons — the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And each of God's persons shares fully in all the essential attributes of his being. Simply put, God's attributes are inseparable from his being. They define who he is. This is one reason that the writers of Scripture commonly described and even named God according to his attributes. For example, he is called "God Almighty" in Ezekiel 10:5, "the God of Justice" in Malachi 2:17, "the Holy One" in Proverbs 9:10, and the "King of Glory" in Psalm 24:7-10.

There are other biblical references to the attributes of God's being as well, but the important point is this: by speaking of God's attributes in these ways, the writers of Scripture revealed who God is, the eternal qualities of his being. So, when David called the Lord the "King of Glory" in Psalm 24, he didn't mean simply that God has a certain amount of glory, or that God is sometimes glorious. Rather, he meant that God always has been and always will be glorious. The attribute of glory is central to his being. And this is true of all three persons of the Trinity.

God is himself all the way through... He's not composed of things. He doesn't have attributes that are derivative. He is himself all the way through... When we say that God is righteous, we're not saying that God possesses righteousness, that it's something that just belongs to him, or he owns, or he acquired later, but that he is righteous in his character and his being. And there is no part of him that is not as equally righteous as any other part because God does not have parts.

— Rev. Cameron Shaffer

As we consider God's being, it's important to remember that all of God's essential attributes are immutable, meaning they can never change. Scripture teaches this in many places, such as Psalm 102:25-27 and Malachi 3:6. God cannot be holy one day but unholy the next. He cannot be all-powerful and all-knowing at certain times, but limited in his power and knowledge at other times. And listen to James' words in James 1:17:

[With] the Father of lights ... there is no variation or shadow due to change (James 1:17).

Despite all the shifts and changes that take place in creation, we can rest assured that God does not change who he is. Today, the essence or being of our triune God is the same as it was before the creation of the world. And it will remain the same forever.

Having spoken of God's being, we are ready to turn to the goodness that God possesses in and of himself.

Goodness

When we speak about God's goodness in the context of ethics, we have in mind his moral purity and perfection. As we've seen, there's no external standard of goodness by which God can be judged. God himself is the ultimate standard of morality. So, whatever conforms to his character is good and right, and whatever does not conform to his character is evil and wrong. John explained this idea in terms of "light" in 1 John 1:5-7. There, he wrote these words:

God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.

But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin (1 John 1:5-7).

In this passage, light is a metaphor for truth and moral purity, while darkness is equated with sin and lies. So, since “in [God there] is no darkness at all,” God is perfectly free from sin in every aspect of his being. In other words, goodness is one of God’s essential attributes.

Now, as we think about God’s goodness in relation to his being, it helps to think once again in terms of perspectives. You’ll recall that many times throughout this series we’ve spoken of the importance of perspectives. For example, our model involves three perspectives: the normative perspective, the situational perspective, and the existential perspective. And each perspective shows us the whole of ethics from a different point of view.

Well, something like this is true of God’s attributes as well. But since God has so many attributes, it’s helpful to think of them in terms of a gemstone. Put simply, each of God’s attributes is a perspective on his entire being. Each of God’s attributes is dependent on the others and qualified by the others. For instance, consider just three of God’s attributes: authority, justice and goodness. God’s authority is good and just. That is to say, it is good and just that God possesses this authority, and he wields his authority in good and just ways. Similarly, his justice is authoritative and good. When God pronounces judgments, they are always authoritative and good. And in the same way, his goodness is authoritative and just. His goodness upholds justice and blesses those who are just. And it also sets the authoritative standard by which all goodness is judged.

Traditionally, theologians have spoken of the interrelatedness of God’s attributes under the heading of God’s “simplicity.” By this term, theologians mean that God isn’t a composite of various unrelated parts, but a unified being of absolute integrity. To use our gemstone illustration, he’s not a piece of jewelry containing many different gems, but rather a single gemstone with many facets. It’s important to understand this fact because it means that nothing in God’s being can contradict his goodness or offer an opposing standard for us to follow. For example, we can never appeal to God’s justice to contradict the implications of his goodness. In the character of God, if something is just, it is also good. And if it is good, it is necessarily just. His attributes always agree because they always describe the same consistent, unified person.

Having seen that all true moral goodness is rooted in the being of God, we’re ready to consider the fact that, at creation, God made humanity to be good. That is, he created us to reflect his personal goodness.

HUMANITY

The account of creation in Genesis 1 is familiar to most Christians. We know that God created the heavens and the earth, shaping them to give them form. And we know that he filled them with inhabitants so they would not be empty. And of course, the

pinnacle of the creative week was the creation of humanity on the sixth day. Listen to Genesis 1:27-28, where Moses recorded these words:

God created [humanity] in his own image ... And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (Genesis 1:27-28).

Our discussion of the goodness of humanity will focus on three details of humanity’s creation mentioned in the verses we just read. First, we’ll consider the fact that humanity was created as the image of God, the visible representation of God that depicted his goodness. Second, we’ll speak of God’s blessing on humanity. And third, we’ll mention the cultural mandate that God assigned to the human race. Let’s begin with the image of God borne by humanity at creation.

Image of God

As we saw in Genesis 1:27, Moses wrote that:

God created [humanity] in his own image (Genesis 1:27).

Views of what it means to be created in the image of God have largely fallen into three categories. The first category that dominated classical theology for quite some time is often called “structural” or “substantial” ... and the activity that’s most associated with this is reasoning. Humans are rational animals, and so the rational part is what establishes our essential connection to God and distinguishes us from animals. The second view which has come to be dominant in modern biblical studies, is the functional view which suggests that the image of God is explained by the succeeding verses in Genesis that deal with stewardship and ruling in the created order, and ancient Near Eastern studies which have suggested that rulers very frequently would place images of themselves in their temples, and so, by analogy, God is functionally using human beings to represent him in his cosmic temple. And then the third view, which has been most dominant in modern systematic theology, and perhaps modern practical theology or church life, is a relational view: by relating to one another in love, we most reveal what God is like.

— Dr. Daniel Treier

Now, when traditional Christian theologians have spoken about human beings as the image of God, they’ve often spoken of attributes like reason, spirituality, moral

nature, immortality, and our original righteousness. And it's true that, to some degree, human beings share these attributes in common with God.

But perhaps one of the best ways to understand the image of God is to look at how the ancient world conceived of images. During the time that Genesis was written, it was common for kings to erect statues and other images of themselves around their kingdoms. These statues were to be treated with respect because they were the king's surrogates. They reminded the people to love, honor and obey him.

In a similar way, God, the great king over all creation, appointed human beings to be his living images. So, when we see a human being, we see an image that reminds us of God. And when we wrongfully disrespect human beings, we dishonor the Lord whose image they are. Consider, for instance, Genesis 9:6, where God gave this instruction:

Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image (Genesis 9:6).

The reason that murderers could be killed was not just that they had taken a human life, but that they had assaulted the image of God. They had mounted an attack against the honor of the great King.

Beyond this, the ancient world also associated divine images with divine *sonship*. Many ancient kings, who were believed to be royal priests of their gods, were called images of their gods. But they were also called "sons" of their gods because they represented the authority of their gods. In a similar way, God created the human race in his image, as his sons and daughters to represent him in the world.

In fact, it's humanity's role as God's representatives and offspring that forms the basis for many of the other conclusions we draw about our goodness. Because God wanted us to be his representatives and children, he created us with qualities that reflected his own perfections. Of course, humanity was not exactly like God. We were not *infinitely* perfect in every way. But we were created without flaw and without sin, in conformity to the standard of God's good character. In this way, God established humanity with our own attribute of goodness, rooted in our very being.

This outlook on the creation of humanity as the image of God is confirmed by the fact that God pronounced a blessing on humanity.

Blessing

One phrase in Genesis 1:28 records an important event that took place when humanity was created. As we read there:

God blessed them (Genesis 1:28).

You'll recall that throughout this series, we've defined Christian ethics as:

theology viewed as a means of determining which persons, acts and attitudes receive God's blessing and which do not

By this definition, we've defined "good" not only in terms of God's character, but also in terms of what he blesses and approves. Whatever God blesses and approves is good, and whatever God curses and condemns is evil.

When God blessed humanity in the creation account, he indicated that humanity was morally good. And significantly, Genesis gives no indication that humanity had done anything to earn this blessing. On the contrary, they had only just been created. So, God's blessing was not an affirmation of their behavior, but of their very being. He blessed them because they had the innate attribute of goodness.

Now that we've looked at humanity as the image of God, and considered God's blessing on humanity, we should briefly address the cultural mandate that God assigned to the human race.

Cultural Mandate

As we saw earlier, Genesis 1:28 records God's cultural mandate to humanity with these words:

God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth" (Genesis 1:28).

In keeping with humanity's role as God's image, God appointed humanity to be his vassal kings on the earth. They were to fill, subdue and rule it for his glory. By this assignment, God indicated that humanity was not only *physically* capable of accomplishing this task, but *morally* capable as well. As we were originally created, human beings were able to build a holy, righteous kingdom fit for God's habitation. We were also able to minister in the Lord's manifest presence without being destroyed. To do this, God created us morally pure in our being, possessing the attribute of goodness, and being free from the corruption of sin. And as a result, we were able to choose and to act in morally good ways.

So, we see that for God and for humanity, goodness was rooted in our very being. God's being is unchanging, and therefore his goodness is unchanging, too. But sadly, humanity's being changed for the worse. God created us with innate goodness. But as we will see, sin corrupted our being, so that it was no longer a source of goodness.

Now that we've considered the relationship between goodness and being as it was manifested at creation, we're ready to turn to the period of the Fall. Specifically, we'll look at the way sin damaged humanity's being, and thereby destroyed our goodness.

FALL

We're all familiar with the Bible's account of humanity's fall into sin recorded in Genesis 3. God created Adam and Eve and placed them in the Garden of Eden. And although he'd given them great freedom in the garden, he'd also given them a specific

prohibition: They were not to eat the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. But, of course, the serpent tempted Eve to eat the fruit, and she did. Then she gave some of the fruit to Adam, and he ate it as well. And as a result of the fall into sin, God cursed Adam and Eve with severe consequences. These consequences applied not only to them, but also to the entire human race that was to descend from them.

We'll mention three consequences of humanity's fall into sin. First, we'll speak of the corruption of our nature. Second, we'll see that the Fall caused our will to become enslaved to sin, so that we lost our ability to choose and to do morally good things. And third, we'll discuss the ways that the Fall affected our knowledge, so that we became incapable of fully recognizing moral goodness. Let's begin with the corruption of our nature that occurred when humanity fell into sin.

NATURE

When we speak of the nature of human beings, we have in mind our:

fundamental character; the central aspects of our being

As we've seen, when God created Adam and Eve, they were perfect and sinless. All their characteristics and attributes were good and pleasing to God. And therefore, we can say that human nature was morally good at the time of creation. But at the Fall, God cursed Adam and Eve for their sin. And as a part of this curse, he changed their nature, so that the fundamental character of the human race was no longer morally good but morally evil. In Romans 5:12, 19, Paul wrote these words about the curse on Adam:

Sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned ... By the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners (Romans 5:12, 19).

Adam's one sin resulted in the fall of all human beings into sin. And the corresponding curse on humanity corrupted the nature of each one of us, leading to death and sin. And listen to Romans 8:5-8, where Paul described the effects of the Fall in this way:

Those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh ... For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God (Romans 8:5-8).

Fallen humanity's nature has been corrupted, so that it's no longer morally good. On the contrary, our fallen nature is evil. We desire sin. We hate God. We rebel against his law. We cannot please God. And we cannot gain his approval or blessing.

Every part of our being, our emotions, our will, our mind, all of that is affected by the Fall. And because of that, we are limited in what we

can do morally. God is a holy God, and what pleases God is holiness. And we cannot be holy in and of ourselves because we're coming from a place of that depravity, that fallen nature. So as, because of the Fall, we are always going to be limited, and as Isaiah even put it, our righteousness is as filthy rags. So, the best that we can do is always going to be sinful or tainted by the Fall.

— Dr. Steve Curtis

Having spoken of the corruption of our nature, we're ready to look at the way the human will became enslaved to sin as a consequence of the Fall.

WILL

Typically, when theologians speak of our will, they have in mind our:

personal faculty for deciding, choosing, desiring, hoping, and intending

Simply put, our will is what we use to make decisions and choices, as well as to consider things that we would like to have, or to do, or to experience.

Now, like the rest of our attributes and faculties, our will reflects our nature. Prior to the Fall, the human will was perfect, created to reflect God and his character, and able to think and to choose in ways that were morally good. But as the Fall proved, the human will was also created with the capacity to make choices that did not please God.

As we've already seen, in the Fall, Adam and Eve used their wills to choose sin instead of loyalty to God. And so, God cursed the human race. And one consequence of this was that our wills were corrupted, making it impossible for us to want to please God. In Romans 6–8, Paul used the metaphor of slavery to describe the curse on the human will. He indicated that sin indwells fallen human beings, enslaving our wills, so that we always desire and choose sin. Listen again to Romans 8:5-8, where Paul wrote these words:

Those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh ... For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God (Romans 8:5-8).

Sin controls fallen human beings, making it impossible for us to submit to God's law, or to do anything that pleases him.

Now, this doesn't mean that we no longer have wills, or that we no longer make genuine choices. On the contrary, we continue to will and to choose according to our nature. But because our nature has been corrupted, we're incapable of doing anything that honors and glorifies God. Sin taints everything we think, say and do.

At first glance, this assessment of fallen human will may seem extreme. After all, sinful people do things that certainly appear to be good. And, in one sense, it would be foolish to deny this. But we must always be careful to look beyond the surface in order to understand the true character of the things that fallen, unredeemed people do. You may recall that earlier in this series, we turned to the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 16, section 7, to help explain this complex issue. Listen once again to what it says:

Works done by unregenerate men ... may be things which God commands, and of good use both to themselves and others; yet, because they proceed not from a heart purified by faith; nor are done in a right manner, according to the Word; nor to a right end, the glory of God; they are therefore sinful, and cannot please God, or make a man meet to receive grace from God.

These words nicely summarize the Bible's teachings about the ethical condition of unregenerate human beings — those who have not yet been redeemed by Christ. First, as the Confession says, there's a sense in which unregenerate people obey God's commands, as well as a sense in which they do things that are good. Jesus taught this same principle in Matthew 7:9-11, where he spoke these words:

Which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him! (Matthew 7:9-11).

Most people do at least some things that are outwardly good, such as loving and providing for their children. So, there's a superficial sense in which even unbelievers perform the types of behavior that God blesses. Nevertheless, the *Westminster Confession* rightly points out *another* sense in which these actions are actually sinful and cannot please God. And the reason is that these acts only meet *some* of the requirements for righteousness.

The Confession summarizes the teaching of Scripture by pointing out that our works must pass five tests in order to be truly good. First, they must be works that God commands. Second, they must be of good use to ourselves and to others. Third, they must proceed from a heart that is purified by faith. Fourth, they must be done in a right manner. And fifth, they must be done for the right end, which is the glory of God.

This point of view lines up with the approach toward ethics we've taken throughout this series. First, the fact that good works are those that "God commands," parallels the normative perspective. All works are judged according to the standard of God's character as it is revealed in his Word. Second, the emphases on "good use," "right manner" and "right end" summarize the facts, goals and means of the situational perspective. And third, the fact that good works must proceed from a "heart purified by faith" corresponds to the existential perspective. Authentically good works can only be done by people whose goodness has been restored through their faith in God.

Unfortunately, for fallen humanity, our beings are corrupt, so that we don't naturally have hearts purified by faith. Our will doesn't desire or strive for the right end, namely God's glory, and we refuse to submit to God's law. So, while unregenerate people can still make choices that look good on the surface, these choices are never *truly* good.

Now that we've looked at the way the Fall has corrupted our nature and enslaved our will to sin, we're ready to speak about our knowledge. We'll focus especially on the way the Fall damaged our ability to understand God's standard.

KNOWLEDGE

Fall of humanity into sin makes them incapable of knowing or understanding God. Before the Fall they could understand and could know, although in limitations, but after falling into sin they have separated. And so, for a fallen human being who has flaws in every thought or every idea, for them, from such an imperfection, to think about God is impossible because, as the Word of God says that every thought of human heart is evil, and from evil to know God is impossible.

— Pastor Hiralal Solanki

It may seem odd to speak of the Fall as damaging our ability to obtain moral knowledge. After all, unbelievers can pick up a Bible and understand its commands. And Scripture itself affirms that unbelievers know many true things about God. But when we look more closely at the Scriptures, we see that while fallen and unredeemed human beings possess *some* true knowledge, the Fall has prevented them from obtaining a *proper* knowledge of God's commands.

Our discussion of the Fall's effect on moral knowledge will divide into three parts. First, we'll speak of the way sin hinders humanity's access to revelation. Second, we'll mention the way sin prevents humanity's understanding of revelation. And third, we'll investigate sin's impact on humanity's obedience to revelation. Let's begin with the way humanity's access to revelation has been hindered by the Fall.

Access to Revelation

One of the chief ways the Fall has hindered humanity's access to revelation is by limiting the Holy Spirit's work of illumination and inward leading. Now, this is not because the Holy Spirit is somehow incapable of ministering to fallen human beings. Rather, it's because God cursed humanity by withholding these divine gifts. As you'll recall from previous lessons, illumination is:

a divine gift of knowledge or understanding that is primarily cognitive

For example, in Matthew 16:17, Peter received the knowledge that Jesus is the Messiah. And inward leading is:

a divine gift of knowledge or understanding that is primarily emotive or intuitive

It includes things such as our conscience and the sense that God would have us take a particular course of action.

In some sense, God provides a measure of both illumination and inward leading to all human beings. For instance, even unbelievers have an instinctive knowledge of God's law. Many of them desire justice, and recognize that it's wrong to steal and to murder. Similarly, unbelievers are often convicted by their consciences when they commit certain sins. But the Holy Spirit doesn't provide the same measure of illumination and inward leading to unbelievers that he provides to believers. He works within unbelievers only enough to condemn them for their violations of God's laws. And the reason for this is simple: God has chosen to reveal himself in ways that bless those who love him and that curse those who hate him. Consider John 17:26, where Jesus prayed these words to his Father:

I made known to [those you have given me] your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them (John 17:26).

Jesus made himself known to believers in order to build love and unity between the Lord and his people. By contrast, he provides his enemies with only a little knowledge of himself — just enough to bring them under judgment.

In addition to reducing fallen humanity's access to revelation, the Fall has also hindered humanity's understanding of revelation.

Understanding of Revelation

Humanity's fall into sin profoundly reduced our ability to make sense of God's revelation. Even though fallen human beings still have access to much of God's revelation, we lack many of the skills needed to comprehend it. We still have the cognitive ability to understand the basic teachings of God's revelation. But moral understanding depends on more than mere reason; it involves the whole person.

Our ethical judgments are not detached assessments of facts. Rather, many non-cognitive factors influence our ethical evaluations, such as our emotions, consciences, intuitions, loyalties, desires, fears, weaknesses, failures, natural rejection of God, and much more. In Matthew 13:13-15, Jesus referred to this problem when he explained his use of parables:

Seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says: "You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see

but never perceive.” For this people's heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed (Matthew 13:13-15).

Fallen human beings still have eyes and ears to receive God’s revelation. But our hearts are hardened against God and his truth. And this often prevents us from properly understanding the revelation we receive. In Ephesians 4:17-18, Paul spoke about the problem this way:

You must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding ... because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart (Ephesians 4:17-18).

The corruption of human nature in the Fall resulted in the hardening of our hearts. And this hardening keeps us from properly understanding God’s revelation.

In the Fall back in Genesis 3, something changed in us. We went from being satisfied with God’s life to being empty and inward... Our very nature turns inward for satisfaction, for fulfillment. And it takes with it the appetites of the flesh and the affections of the soul. All that goes inward for satisfaction. The interesting thing that happens with that is that brings a very protective mindset in us, because my self-interest is first, because I’m number one in my own self-interested heart, I have to have to protection... And what we find in the sense of hardness of heart is that as God speaks to us, because we want our way, because I want my way when I want it, I can’t allow God to direct me. I won’t allow God to direct me. And the walls I put up for protection keep my ears from hearing his voice.

— Dr. Chris Lohrstorfer

In many ways, our logic and intellect still function as they should. And this is one reason that God still holds us accountable for understanding his revelation. But the Fall has corrupted us so that we oppose God and resist his truth. So, instead of accepting true knowledge from God, we delude ourselves into believing the lies that our sinful hearts invent.

Having seen that fallen human beings have reduced access to revelation and a darkened understanding of revelation, we should turn to the way our obedience to revelation has also been corrupted by the Fall.

Obedience to Revelation

Now, it may seem odd to think of obedience as an aspect of knowledge. After all, we normally think of revelation as providing us with knowledge, and we think of obedience as a separate step that follows knowledge. And there is a sense in which this is correct. But there is another sense in which knowledge and obedience are essentially the

same thing. And in this sense, the Fall hinders our knowledge of God by destroying our ability to obey him.

To understand how our inability to obey God impedes our knowledge, we'll focus on just two aspects of the relationship between knowledge and obedience. First, we'll see that, in Scripture, there's a reciprocal relationship between knowledge and obedience. And second, we'll consider some of the ways that these two ideas are inseparable from one another in the Bible. We'll begin with the idea that there is a reciprocal relationship between knowledge and obedience.

Reciprocal. On one side, knowledge of God produces obedience to God. We see this in passages like 2 Peter 1:3, where Peter wrote these words:

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence (2 Peter 1:3).

Here, knowledge is given for the purpose of producing life and godliness. Again, this follows the pattern we've come to expect. First, we receive and understand God's revelation, and then we obediently apply it to our lives. But, on the other side, the reverse is also true. In Scripture, obedience is a prerequisite for knowledge, and the obedient application of God's revelation in our lives leads to knowledge of him. As Proverbs 1:7 teaches us:

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge (Proverbs 1:7).

And as we read in Proverbs 15:33:

The fear of the Lord is instruction in wisdom (Proverbs 15:33).

In these verses and many others throughout Scripture, knowledge flows from obedience. When we submit ourselves to God's lordship, we are in a position to understand his revelation. But the Fall has corrupted our nature and our will to the point that we rebel against God. In fact, we are incapable of submitting to his word. And since knowledge flows from obedience, people who are unable to obey God are also unable to know him in the truest sense of the word. Or to put it another way, just as obedience leads to knowledge, sin leads to ignorance.

Having seen the problems created by the Fall in the reciprocal relationship between knowledge and obedience, we're ready to consider the idea that, in the Bible, these two ideas are inseparable from one another.

Inseparable. In Scripture, it's often the case that the concepts of knowledge and obedience are essentially synonymous. Sometimes they are set beside each other in such a way that one concept follows and helps explain the other. For instance, listen to Hosea 6:6:

I desire loyalty rather than sacrifice, And the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings (Hosea 6:6, NASB).

In this verse, the phrase “knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings” follows and helps explain the earlier phrase “loyalty rather than sacrifice.” The parallels between these phrases indicate that sacrifice is synonymous with burnt offerings, and loyalty — a form of obedience — is synonymous with knowledge of God.

At other times, either knowledge or obedience is provided as a definition for the other. For example, in Jeremiah 22:16, the Lord spoke these words:

“He defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well. Is that not what it means to know me?” declares the Lord (Jeremiah 22:16, NIV).

Here, knowledge of God is defined in terms of obedience rendered to God, particularly in the form of preserving justice for the poor and needy.

In the Old Testament knowledge of God and obedience of God are connected this way: covenantally. To know God is to live in light of his covenant. And then on the reverse of that, to forget God is to not live in light of his covenant. I’ll give you some examples. In the book of Judges, there are these cycles that the Israelites go through... It says at the beginning, “and the Israelites did that which was evil in the eyes of the Lord.” That is, they forgot the Lord their God. Now, it wasn’t that Israel didn’t know who Yahweh was anymore, didn’t know that he was the God of heaven and earth. It’s that they forgot to live in light of the covenant that they were in with him. So, forgetting is tantamount to covenant disobedience. Knowing, on the other hand, is kind of a covenant code word for living in light of that or being faithful in the context of covenant, or just being in covenant... So, to know is to live in light of the covenant. To forget is not to live in light of the covenant. So those are two covenant code words for either obedience or disobedience to the covenant.

— Dr. Miles Van Pelt

Third, Scripture sometimes demonstrates the similarity between knowledge and obedience by using one as an example of the other. Consider Hosea 4:1, where the prophet accused Israel in this way:

Hear the word of the Lord, O children of Israel, for the Lord has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land. There is no faithfulness or steadfast love, and no knowledge of God in the land (Hosea 4:1).

Hosea listed three things that the Israelites had failed to do and that had resulted in God’s anger: they were unfaithful, they were unloving, and they did not know God. By including knowledge of God in this list of ethical examples, Hosea indicated that knowledge is part of obedience, and that we have an ethical responsibility to know the Lord.

Now, knowledge and obedience do not always mean the same thing. Nevertheless, Scripture ties these ideas together quite closely, teaching that, in a very important sense, if we can't obey God, we can't know him.

The Fall devastated humanity. God's curse on Adam and Eve corrupted the nature, will, and knowledge of every human being who descended from them through natural means. And the ethical consequences of this are staggering. No fallen human being can think, say or do anything that is morally good. All our thoughts, words and deeds are sinful in some measure because we are fallen, sinful people. So, whenever we make ethical decisions, we have to consider the ways that the Fall has affected every person involved.

Having considered the relationship between goodness and being during the periods of creation and the Fall, we're ready to explore the period of redemption, when God restores those who trust him for salvation and empowers them for goodness.

REDEMPTION

The period of redemption began immediately after the Fall, when God extended mercy to Adam and Eve, even as he cursed them for their sin. In earlier lessons, we've referred to this as the *proto-euangelion* or "first gospel," when God offered to send a redeemer to repair the damage done by the Fall. But the period of redemption didn't immediately eradicate all the effects of the Fall. Rather, redemption has been a slow process, and it won't be completed until Jesus returns in glory. Until then, the Fall continues to have consequences for all human beings, including believers. Even so, as individuals are redeemed, as unbelievers become believers, they are rescued from the consequences of the Fall in important and wonderful ways.

We'll discuss the redemption of individual believers in ways that parallel our discussion of the Fall. First, we'll focus on our nature, speaking of how redemption restores our innate goodness. Second, we'll talk about our human will and our freedom from sin. And third, we'll focus on knowledge, the restoration of our ability to make proper use of God's revelation. Let's begin with how our nature is restored when we're redeemed.

NATURE

You'll recall that our nature is our:

fundamental character; the central aspects of our being

As we've seen, our fallen nature is evil. We hate God and love sin. And we're incapable of moral goodness. But when we're redeemed in Christ, our nature is renewed. When the Holy Spirit regenerates us, he gives us a good nature, one that loves God and hates sin. And he restores our moral ability, so that we become capable of true goodness.

Listen to Ezekiel 36:26, where God spoke about the future redemption that would come in Christ:

I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26).

And in Romans 6:6-11, Paul spoke of the matter in this way:

Our old self was crucified with [Christ] in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin... consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus (Romans 6:6-11).

You know, because of the gospel of Jesus Christ, we have, according to the teaching of Romans 6, we have been united with Christ. We've been buried with him through baptism and death in order that as Christ was raised from the dead according to the glory of the Father, so we too might live in newness of life. So, the reality is, is that oftentimes we have to accept that reality mentally, emotionally, spiritually as Christians, and count ourselves dead, reckon ourselves dead, accept that we have been so unified, put in union with Jesus Christ, that we really are dead to the power of sin controlling us. The change in a Christian's life and transformation is when he understands how grace really has so united him with Christ that he does not have to give in to those sinful impulses.

— Dr. Pete Alwinson

The consistent witness of both the Old and the New Testaments is that fallen human beings have sinful hearts and spirits. But when God redeems us, he recreates us, giving us new hearts and spirits that are righteous rather than sinful. And with these new natures, we are, for the first time, able to love God and to submit to his Word, and thereby, to gain his blessings. Of course, our redemption is not yet complete, so that even with our new natures, we're still tainted by sin. This is why in Mark 10:18 Jesus made this statement:

No one is good except God alone (Mark 10:18).

Redeemed humanity has a measure of goodness, but we are not perfect beings like God is. Even so, in our new natures, we are now able to receive God's blessings in wonderful ways.

With this understanding of our redeemed nature in mind, we should turn to the restoration of our will that takes place when we begin to experience redemption.

WILL

As we said earlier, our will is our:

personal faculty for deciding, choosing, desiring, hoping, and intending

We've seen that the Fall into sin made it impossible for us to use our wills in pure and righteous ways. Paul described this corruption in terms of slavery, teaching that our fallen, unredeemed wills are enslaved to the sin that indwells us. Because of this slavery to sin, we have no ability to make choices that please God, and we have no desire to please him. But when we come to faith in Christ, sin's hold over our will is broken, so that we're no longer forced to desire and to choose sin. Moreover, the Holy Spirit indwells us, strengthening and moving our wills to love and obey the Lord. The Lord spoke of this aspect of redemption in Ezekiel 36:27, where he offered this blessing:

I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules (Ezekiel 36:27).

And as Paul wrote in Philippians 2:12-13:

Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure (Philippians 2:12-13).

Now, we need to remember that the renewal of our will does not completely solve the problem of sin in our lives. We're still indwelt by sin, so that we must constantly fight against it. But the difference is this: We are no longer enslaved by sin, forced to do its bidding. Even so, it can still be very hard to resist sin.

When we accept Christ as our Lord and Savior, we have been justified... But what happens after that is sanctification... So, even though we have been fully justified, we're still wrestling with the sin that lives with us. Though we are called to holiness, there is something within us, our sinful nature, that's still not 100 percent purified. So, this is what we call sanctification. In the process of sanctification, we will still struggle with sin.

— Rev. Aris Sanchez

Paul described this struggle in Romans 7:21-23, where he wrote these words about the Christian life:

When I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war

against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members (Romans 7:21-23).

We can summarize the Bible's teaching on the human will in this way: At creation, our will was able both to sin and to resist sin. But when humanity fell into sin, we lost our ability to resist sin. At the same time, sin came to dwell in us as a master, enslaving our wills. In redemption, our wills are restored, and sin's mastery is broken, so that we are once again able to resist sin. And the Holy Spirit indwells us to strengthen and motivate us against sin.

Unfortunately, in our present stage of redemption, sin still indwells us, leaving us to struggle between sin's influence and the influence of the Holy Spirit. But when Jesus returns to complete our redemption, we will be free from sin's indwelling presence, and influenced only by the Holy Spirit, so that we'll never choose sin again.

Now that we've considered our nature and will, we're ready to talk about the restoration of our knowledge when we're redeemed.

KNOWLEDGE

As before, our discussion of knowledge will divide into three parts. First, we'll talk about our access to revelation; second, our understanding of revelation; and third, our obedience to revelation. Let's begin with the way our access to revelation is restored in redemption.

Access to Revelation

Earlier, we saw that the Fall significantly restricts humanity's access to illumination from the Holy Spirit, which is:

a divine gift of knowledge or understanding that is primarily cognitive

We also saw that the Fall restricts our access to the Holy Spirit's inward leading, which is:

a divine gift of knowledge or understanding that is primarily emotive or intuitive

In redemption, we have greater access to these ministries of the Holy Spirit. Rather than simply giving us enough revelation to condemn us, the Spirit goes further. He convinces us of the truth of the gospel and of many other things that are part of our salvation. And he makes our consciences sensitive to God's character and gives us godly intuitions. For example, listen to John's words in 1 John 2:27:

[The Holy One's] anointing teaches you about everything (1 John 2:27).

And in Ephesians 1:17, Paul spoke of illumination and inward leading in this way:

[May] the God of our Lord Jesus Christ ... give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him (Ephesians 1:17).

Besides restoring our access to revelation, redemption also restores our understanding of revelation, again through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

Understanding of Revelation

As we've seen, the Fall caused us to become God's enemies and to resist the truth. So, instead of accepting true knowledge from God, we delude ourselves into believing lies. But when we're saved, the Holy Spirit changes our hearts, so that we love God instead of hating him. And he renews our minds, so that we're able to grasp the truths that God reveals. In 1 Corinthians 2:12-16, Paul explained our redeemed understanding of revelation in this way:

We have received ... the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God... The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them ... But we have the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:12-16).

One of the wonderful works of the Holy Spirit in our lives as Christians is to illumine Scripture, or provide resources for us to be able to interpret and apply the Bible accurately and properly. In 1 Corinthians 2:14-16, Paul talks about a natural person and a spiritual person. In the context, Paul's talking about who can receive and understand the revelation of God. The natural person, Paul says, doesn't understand God's revelation. Indeed, the natural person can't understand the things of God because the Spirit is needed to understand this divine revelation. Paul then talks about the spiritual person, or the person who is illumined and guided by the Holy Spirit. This spiritual person, the person illumined by the Holy Spirit, can indeed understand and embrace all that God has revealed... So, the Spirit's wonderful work is to help us understand the Word of God, understand it's meaning, and be ready to apply it as we understand it.

— Dr. Gregg R. Allison

Without the Spirit of God indwelling us, we would not be able to understand God's truth. Our rebellion against God would cloud our reason, and we would believe all sorts of errors about God's character and works. But the Holy Spirit guards our hearts and

our minds, destroying sin's ability to deceive us, and empowering us to understand revelation. Listen to Paul's words in Colossians 1:9:

From the day we heard [about you], we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding (Colossians 1:9).

Paul knew that no believer has a perfect understanding of God's revelation. So, he continually prayed for the believers in Colossae to receive further understanding. And just like them, we also need the constant ministry of the Holy Spirit so that our own understanding can increase.

So far, we've seen that redemption restores our knowledge by giving us access to revelation and by helping us form a proper understanding of revelation. At this point, we're ready to talk about the way redemption restores our knowledge by fostering obedience to revelation.

Obedience to Revelation

In our discussion of the way redemption fosters obedience to revelation, we'll begin with the fact that there's a causal relationship between redemption and obedience. Then, as in our discussion of knowledge and obedience, we'll consider some of the ways these two ideas are inseparable from one another in the Bible. Let's begin with the causal relationship between them — the fact that redemption leads to obedience.

Causal. Scripture makes it clear that one of the main features of redemption is the obedience it produces in the lives of believers. Under the Holy Spirit's guidance and indwelling power, believers behave differently from the rest of the world. Fallen humanity hates God and cannot obey him. But redeemed humanity loves God and does obey him. The apostle John wrote about this idea frequently, such as in 1 John 2:3-6. Listen to his words there:

We know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says "I know him" but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked (1 John 2:3-6).

The Scriptures often refer to the obedience that accompanies redemption in terms of "fruit." For instance, in Matthew 3:8, John the Baptist demanded that his followers produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And in Galatians 5, Paul contrasted the evil things that sin produces in unbelievers with the good fruit that the Holy Spirit produces in believers. Listen to Paul's words in Galatians 5:22-23:

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

The fruit of the Spirit actually are the characteristics, the virtues of Christ that the Holy Spirit is working and developing and growing within the believer. They're actually the evidence of salvation. Not so much that nonbelievers can't be kind and nonbelievers can't show love, but rather, that the ability to do so rightly with the right motives, the ability to do so in order to glorify God, with his glory being in mind and our purpose, is what has that holy aspect to those various characteristics... The fruit of the Spirit is contrasted with the works of evil in Galatians 5, and we are caused to understand that there is supposed to be a separation for God's kingdom people... The very fruit of the Spirit causes believers to be distinct from the darkness, to be the light in the darkness, to be the salt of the earth, showing the very attributes and virtues of Christ.

— Dr. John Norwood

Through his indwelling and redeeming presence, the Holy Spirit produces the fruit of righteousness in our lives. He leads us to obey God in many ways, so that we exhibit many moral and spiritual virtues.

Having looked at the fact that there is a causal relationship between redemption and obedience, we should turn to the fact that these two ideas are inseparable from one another. To be redeemed is to obey the Lord.

Inseparable. Many passages in Scripture indicate that redemption and obedience are inseparable. No one can be obedient to God without being redeemed, and no one can be redeemed without being obedient to God. Typically, Scripture indicates this connection by defining believers as those who are obedient to the Lord. Sometimes, this is because conversion to Christ is itself an act of obedience. For instance, in 1 Peter 1:22-23, the apostle gave this instruction:

Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, since you have been born again (1 Peter 1:22-23).

Peter spoke here of conversion to Christ when we are “born again” and he identified this conversion as “obedience to the truth.”

At other times, redemption is equated with obedience because redeemed people *continue* to obey the Lord throughout their lives. As Hebrews 5:9 says:

[Jesus] became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him (Hebrews 5:9).

Salvation in Christ is inseparable from obedience to Christ. If the Spirit of Christ indwells you, he will continue to produce obedience in your life.

Of course, as we consider the relationship between redemption and obedience, we can't lose sight of this fact: Redemption produces obedience to God, and obedience to God produces knowledge of God and his ways. Recall once again that the Fall corrupted our knowledge partly by making it impossible for us to obey the Lord. Correspondingly, one way that redemption reverses the curse of the Fall is by restoring our obedience, which in turn produces knowledge of God. And, as we saw earlier, knowledge produces obedience.

In light of the fact that redemption restores our knowledge of God, it shouldn't surprise us that Scripture often summarizes redemption in terms of knowledge of God. This knowledge consists of cognitive content, such as knowing the facts of the gospel. But it also includes experiential and relational knowledge, such as when we speak of knowing God himself. We find this teaching in places like Psalm 36:10 and Daniel 11:32. And, in John 17:3, Jesus prayed these words:

This is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent (John 17:3).

So, in the period of redemption, our innate goodness is restored in the renewal of our nature, in the restoration of our will, and in the new knowledge of God. And by this redemption of our beings, we obtain the ability to perform good works — to say and to think and to do those things that God blesses.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson, we've begun our study of the existential perspective by exploring the relationship between goodness and being. We've looked at goodness historically, beginning with the time of creation. There, we saw that goodness was rooted in the being of God, and that humanity was created with an innately good being. Next, we saw that the Fall destroyed humanity's innate goodness, making us incapable of morally good behavior. And finally, we saw that in the period of redemption, the goodness of our being is restored when we come to salvation in Christ, making us capable of morally good behavior.

As we work to make biblical decisions in the modern world, it is important to remember that true goodness always involves matching our character to God's character. The bad news is that we are fallen and indwelt by sin, incapable of reflecting God's goodness. But the good news is that when the Holy Spirit applies redemption to us, he indwells us and gives us new natures, so that we are able to live in ways that God approves and blesses. And if we keep these facts in mind, we will have a greater ability to answer our ethical questions in ways that please our glorious Lord.

CONTRIBUTORS

Dr. John Frame (Host) is Professor of Systematic Theology and Philosophy Emeritus at Reformed Theological Seminary. He began his teaching career at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia and later became a founding faculty member at Westminster Seminary California, where he taught for more than 20 years. He is also an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). Dr. Frame received both his Master of Arts and Master of Philosophy degrees from Yale University and his Doctor of Divinity degree from Belhaven College. A prolific writer, Dr. Frame has authored numerous books and articles, including *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (P&R, 2013) and *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology* (P&R, 2015). His book, *The Doctrine of God* (P&R, 2002) won the 2003 Gold Medallion Award from the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association. He has also contributed to several theological reference volumes, such as the *New Dictionary of Christian Apologetics* (IVP, 2006).

Dr. Gregg R. Allison is Professor of Christian Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

Dr. Pete Alwinson is the Executive Director of FORGE: City Wide Ministry to Men with Man in the Mirror and the founding pastor of Willow Creek Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Winter Springs, FL

Dr. Steve Curtis is Director of Timothy Two Project International.

Dr. Chris Lohrstorfer is Associate Professor of Wesleyan Theology at Wesley Biblical Seminary.

Dr. John Norwood is Senior Pastor of the Ujima Village Christian Church in Ewing, New Jersey, and is the founder and director of the Christian Mission School of Theology.

Rev. Aris Sanchez is the General Director of Seminario Teológico de Santiago in the Dominican Republic and Director of Spanish Initiatives at Westminster Theological Seminary.

Rev. Cameron Shaffer is the pastor of Langhorne Presbyterian Church in Langhorne, PA.

Rev. Hiralal Solanki serves as Pastor at Faith Bible Presbyterian Church and as Pastoral Coordinator of the Indian Reformed Fellowship in New Delhi, India.

Dr. Daniel Treier is the Blanchard Professor of Theology at Wheaton College & Graduate School.

Dr. Miles Van Pelt is the Alan Hayes Belcher, Jr. Professor of Old Testament and Biblical Languages and Academic Dean at Reformed Theological Seminary.

GLOSSARY

Christian ethics – Theology viewed as a means of determining which human persons, acts and attitudes receive God’s blessing and which do not

cultural mandate – The command in Genesis 1:28 instructing humanity to develop and rule the creation to display God's glory

ethical judgment – The application of God’s Word to a situation by a person

ethics – The study of moral right and wrong; the study of what is good and what is evil

existential – Of or relating to existence and being

existential perspective – Ethical perspective that considers the person, the motives, and the inner leading of the Holy Spirit; one of the three perspectives on human knowledge used by theologian John Frame in his Tri-Perspectivalism; concerned with the response of the believing heart through emotion and feeling

human nature – One’s fundamental character or the central aspects of one’s being

human will – A person's faculty for deciding, choosing, desiring, hoping, intending and making decisions

illumination – Divine gift of knowledge or understanding, primarily cognitive, attributed to the work of the Holy Spirit

inward leading – Divine gift of knowledge or understanding, primarily emotive or intuitive, attributed to the work of the Holy Spirit

normative perspective – Ethical perspective that looks to God's Word as the norm or standard for making ethical decisions

proto-euangelion/protoevangelion – Theological term for "first gospel" or the first promise of redemption found in Genesis 3:15

revelation – God's communication of truth to man

simplicity of God – Theological term used to explain that God's essence is not a composite of different substances, but a unified whole consisting of only one substance

situational perspective – Approach to ethics with an emphasis on the situation and how the details of our circumstances relate to our ethical decisions

Westminster Confession of Faith – An ecumenical doctrinal summary composed by the Westminster Assembly of Divines and published in 1647