
3. PUBLIC GOOD

So what *is* 'good' for us?

What is good for society? If people are designed by God to thrive, what should we know about God's design so that public authorities can encourage human flourishing and avoid working against the grain of God's workmanship? What is the *content* of the public good?

Creation is structured to flourish in life

Creation order from the beginning

"God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good." This resounding statement completes a structured series of seven where God creates and evaluates: "And God saw that it was good." The seventh adds "*very good*" once human life had been created as the crown of God's work.

'Creation' is not just 'nature' in the sense of the 'natural world'. It includes humankind and their role as God's representatives to rule and be fruitful within it. This will include culture and human association. Everything in human culture in that respect reflects something of the goodness and the potential of God's created order.

Jonathan Chaplin re-established the doctrine of creation as central to the question of the public square:

The key to the biblical doctrine of creation is not to do with biological origins – of course there is a lot to say about that but that seems to me not the thrust of what the Bible has to say about creation. Rather, the central thrust is to teach us

the comprehensive scope of God's will for the whole of human life, indeed the whole of reality, and to teach us about our radical dependency on his sustaining power and love and law. To confess 'I believe in God, the Creator of heaven and earth' is to confess that all human creatures inhabit a shared reality, designed and sustained by one God, pronounced 'very good' in Genesis chapter 1.

This shared reality is a *structured* reality. It is not a coincidence that 'good' is repeated seven times within a structured account of creation paying attention to the production of 'kinds' and the creation of the seven-day week. There is a proper ordering and purpose within this structure of kinds – waters are for the sea, the sun is for the day, birds are for the air, fish are for the sea, fruit is for food and humankind (male and female) is to multiply and rule over it all under God. It is this designed, structured reality which is very good.

Consequent to creation's structure is its *fruitfulness*. "Let the earth bring forth living creatures according to their kinds" is typical and reaches its climax in the structured mandate to humanity: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply...'"

As the infinite life of the Trinity overflowed to give *life* to the creation, creation has its own relational order for fruitfulness and the multiplication of life in itself. So when we are identifying the public good, we are identifying God's design which provides for human flourishing and the burgeoning of *life* itself.

Creation order still has universal authority

God's structuring of creation was maintained after the fall. God upholds his original order of creation in the face of human sin and rebellion. God maintains that order, he maintains human nature, he maintains the image of God in all human beings in spite of our turning away from him. Consequently Noah was given the renewed mandate to "be fruitful and multiply" and the dignity of human life in the image of God was reasserted after the Flood.

While the Bible teaches that “creation itself groans” and exhibits disorder as a result of the curse, this merely reinforces the abiding importance of the creation order. The proliferation of weeds and the painfulness of childbirth only act as curses because men and women are still here to enjoy the earth’s fruitfulness and to flourish together with children.

Therefore the life-multiplying creation order of Genesis remains the pattern for our good. As Jonathan Chaplin summarised:

We need to recover a confidence in God’s design of creation order as being the very best for human beings. We are tempted today to feel like an embattled minority in an encroaching secular world. ... We are fearful that our perspective on the world is just a tribal perspective, that it is an idiosyncratic perspective that has no possibility of being recognised or defended, or commended in the public realm. But if God’s creation design is indeed what it claims to be, if it is universal, if it is the condition for a flourishing human existence, if it is the route towards *shalom* then it is not just that for Christians, it is that for all human creatures. So what we have to share with other people is not a gnostic insight – it’s the truth about their own human nature...

But how does the rest of the Bible shed light on the goodness of creation and its life?

Creation life is the subject of redemption

God did not abolish creation at the fall because God’s plan is to restore it by *redemption*. When Christ returns there will be a renewed creation: the new heavens and a new earth (2 Pet. 3:13, Rev. 21:1), where the Greek for ‘new’ implies ‘renewed’. Then we will see the fulfilment of God’s original design of humanity, ruling over creation in perfect fellowship with God. Psalm 8, which celebrates the structured creation narrative, turns out in the New Testament to be a prophecy of the world to come (Heb. 2:5-9). The creation of humanity and its exalted role in dominion over the whole cre-

ation thus becomes an anticipation of Jesus' exaltation as the second Adam. As the head of a new humanity Jesus has been given the kingly rule over all things, and his people, his own human brothers and sisters, will rule with him. No wonder the end of Revelation echoes the beginning of Genesis.

So the story of the *kingdom of God* is the story that God's good rule over creation, mediated through humans, is being permanently re-established. Ever since Adam was expelled from paradise, the earth has suffered the consequences of human enmity against God. God's good rule over creation is not mediated through humanity when humanity rejects it. Rather than life, the result has been death through the misrule, mismanagement and unnecessary suffering with which we are all so familiar.

So the kingdom of God is *good news* for the world, because where God's rule is restored, the earth rejoices. This will be seen in its fullness when the King returns in person, inaugurating the new creation.

Creation life was patterned in the promised land

The coming kingdom was to be pictured by the history of Israel. Specifically, the promised land was to serve as a miniature of the whole creation rejoicing in fruitful life under God's rule through his rescued people. While all the other nations of the earth groaned under the curses of fallen humanity, the land of Israel would be a beacon of redemption hope under God's good rule.

Creation life ordered by God's law

God's life-giving rule was to be mediated in the land through the *law*. God gave Israel his orderly laws, statutes, testimonies, commandments and precepts, and by applying them the people would experience the fruitful life for which they were created. As they stood on the other side of the Jordan, poised to enter the promised land, Moses recited the law and called the people to obedience. In God's law they had life, so obedience was urged upon them: "Now choose life, that you and your children may live." (Deut. 30:19 NIV).

When Moses finished reciting all these words to all Israel, he said to them, “Take to heart all the words I have solemnly declared to you this day, so that you may command your children to obey carefully all the words of this law. They are not just idle words for you – they are your life. By them you will live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess.” (Deut. 32:45-47 NIV).

God’s laws are “not just idle words” for us either. In them the good ordering of life in God’s creation is spelled out. For Israel, the law was a unique privilege because as God’s revelation it acted as the means by which his rule could be restored over creation. No other nation had laws like it. For us, the law is a privilege too because we can now eavesdrop into that same divine ordering for a flourishing life in creation. In the words of Jonathan Chaplin:

The Old Testament law is a uniquely authoritative revelation of how the people of Israel were to live within the design of creation. ... Torah pointed the people of Israel to a way of life, or ways of life, that are in conformity with God’s original creational design. ... We should interpret the law as a specification of creational design for that particular people. ... Its authority is not bound by its context but transcends it... It is a unique insight into God’s universal design for the whole of creation.

Biblical law is precious indeed. God’s law was rightly prized by our believing forefathers both in ancient Israel and in the legal development of much of the West. Today we can rediscover its riches. In the law we are told about our neighbours so that we can love them, and about ourselves so that, all other things being equal, we can live a long and peaceful life. We are given insights into how social relationships and structures should ideally operate. Even by the law’s variety of sanctions we can begin to identify those aspects of social structuring which God has designed to be more fundamental.

Creation life for every family

By way of example, we can explore the law of jubilee from Leviticus 25.

If Israel in the promised land acted as a miniature of restored humanity ruling over creation, then each Israelite family served as an even smaller microcosm of the whole, within its own plot of land. Just as the new creation will be given to God's rescued people, so the promised land was given to a nation of former slaves, and within this land God gave a specific and perpetual allocation of land to each household. Thus, free families were to live together on their own fruitful land which they could work, enjoy and pass down to their children.

The jubilee principle acted to maintain this pattern of creation life against the degenerative effects of sin over time in this cursed world. It did so every fifty years by a miniature repeat of God's restoration of freed slaves to their original land, thereby providing a repeated picture of all humanity's future hope.

In practice the jubilee worked through a principle of inalienable family land tenure combined with the more familiar principle of redemption. The plot of land given by God would be kept in the family in perpetuity. If a family fell into hard times they would become separated from the free enjoyment of their land, either by selling it or, additionally, by selling themselves to become the 'slaves' (more like bonded employees) of their creditors. If, after up to fifty years, either the land or the family had not already been redeemed by their relatives, then the sound of the trumpet heralded their restoration. The law ensured both the people and land were redeemed without money and with no strings attached. This took place in a Sabbath year of rest which reminded the people that they were set free from slave labour to enjoy God's world. So once again the freed slaves could enjoy God's creation life as he intended, no doubt praising God all the more for his gracious ways, past, present and future.

Insights for today

The jubilee offers a resource for much fruitful meditation. As a start, we might suggest that the permanently valid principle underlying it was that it was good for every household (extended family) to have ownership of sufficient productive resources to give the family economic independence. Integral to this vision was the family's work on that land, just as Adam was given the garden, and humanity is to care actively for creation. This allowed for generosity and it encouraged family stewardship of creation, because a man's land was not only for himself, but for his family and descendants. As a result this fostered a sense of rootedness, and the whole picture ensured that families lived in proximity to one another and were able to provide and care for one another's welfare. Such a developed picture of creation goodness irrepressibly reminded the people of God's goodness to them and inspired their free worship to him.

Jonathan Chaplin then suggested two high-level applications by way of example. First, the jubilee points against extensive state ownership or control of the productive resources on which people depend. This observation is coherent with what we saw in Romans 13 – the expectation is that the principal acting agents of society are the people themselves, rather than first of all the state. Secondly, the jubilee points to the protection of the economically vulnerable. How that protection works, and who provides that protection is a complex question: but it should be on our agenda because the Torah is marked by its consistent provisions to ensure protection for the poor.

Using biblical law in this way requires serious thinking. Mainstream Bible teaching has not been engaged in this kind of publicly-oriented thinking for many generations, and it may therefore seem unfamiliar and daunting to us. But rational reflection and serious intellectual work is fitting in the light of what we know about the nature of public truth from the last chapter. And in the Bible God reassures us that he doesn't expect us to find all the answers automatically. We are reminded in the Psalms that the godly are those who *meditate* on the law of the LORD both day and by night, and that when we do, we will prosper in life like a fruitful tree planted

in God's good creation (Psalm 1). So God's laws are "more precious than gold, than much pure gold" (Psalm 19:10).

This 'day and night' meditation in Leviticus sounds challenging. But we should be encouraged to recognise that in these particular applications of the jubilee principle we have certainly moved beyond the basics. Indeed, we will always find that our biblical path leads us to deeper things which need further meditation before we can put them to use for the public good – and rightly so. But while some things are not immediately clear, others leave the reader in no doubt, and it is important to start with the basics.

Basics of the public good

The same can be said of the 'golden' jubilee principle. However we may choose to mine its depths, certain basic truths shine clearly on its surface. The public good is seen in free families living together in physical proximity, with resources which they can use for work, enjoy and pass down to their children. In this simple picture we see the foundational elements of the creation narrative introduced in Genesis which are later reaffirmed throughout Scripture.

Some key features

So we can provide a guide to some key features of the goodness of the creation order, traced from Genesis 1 and 2 and the jubilee vignette. Humans are designed to enjoy *life* in God's world sharing equal status together as God's representatives caring for creation. God has created them *male and female* to have *children* and to be fruitful together in the lasting and stable *family* life centred in the public structure of lifelong monogamous heterosexual *marriage*. The delight of faithful sexual union celebrates this bond and also brings fruitfulness. God has instituted such family life in the context of the extended family, as the basic unit of public life and welfare. Children's primary duty is to their parents, who correspondingly have primary responsibility for them. As God's ruling representatives, people should steward resources productively for the benefit of others, prioritising their own children and relatives. To do so they should have ownership of their own *property* without stealing from others, but trusting others and trusting in God's good

provision. Humans are not defined by their work but should enjoy contented *rest* and experience the *freedom* to live in the world God has graciously given them. This should be a freedom without slavery or harm so they can volunteer to their Creator their heartfelt *worship*.

The Ten Commandments

Notice how this simple account effectively repeats the vision of the Ten Commandments which, in this context, emerge as God's own ten-point guide for a long and flourishing life in the creation he has given us to live in and care for. This explains why they act as a summary of the key principles of public love and serve as his starting point for the law in Exodus 20, and again as the starting point in Deuteronomy 6 when the law is repeated. They then reappear by allusion throughout the prophets. Little wonder that many Western political buildings were built – including the US Supreme Court – displaying the Ten Commandments as a symbol of life-protecting law.

It is helpful that God's ten-point guide is expressed in moral injunctions. They give us a handle on how to move toward the universal good through the specifics of our particular situation. In other words, the language of moral command has a practical epistemological advantage: how we know what to do. We may not always be able to see the whole divine conception of the public good and its relationship to where we stand in any given moment. How then do we pursue the public good? Moral commands work with our God-given sense of personal responsibility and accord with our conscience. When as officers of the state or private citizens we do what is right and help others to do the same, with reference to those commands, we can be confident *that* we are at the same time working for the benefit of ourselves and those around us. It may only be later that we fully understand *how* what was right was also good. At all times we remember from chapter 1 that in relation to society, our use of the moral order is for society's benefit, and that this does not equate to an anti-gospel sort of moralism.

The Ten Commandments act as a significant affirmation of human freedom, not least because – ironically – they are mostly presented in the negative. Adam was created with God-given freedom to enjoy Eden. The trees were there for him to eat any fruit he chose, except that he should *not* eat from the one tree which was forbidden. Similarly, God gave his people freedom to live, and the role of the law – “you shall not” – was to protect, not curtail, this corporate freedom. It is only when life is thought to be provided by law, rather than by God, that the negatives of the law seem to be a restriction of freedom. This is an important distinction to keep in mind so that our positive vision of human life protected by law is not communicated as a vision of negatives, which will be interpreted as moralism. The message of the Ten Commandments is that there is more to life than law and that’s why law can protect it.

The enjoyment of the public good

So a final aspect remains. The Ten Commandments ensure we don’t ignore the role of the *human heart* in the enjoyment of the good. Israel was given freedom to leave the political tyranny in Egypt in order to have the space to worship God, ultimately in the promised land. Their final enjoyment of the land was grounded in their enjoyment of the God who gave it to them. The Ten Commandments commence with a statement of this motivation and with the worship of God, and they conclude with the significance of trusting contentment. Thus, interwoven throughout the social provisions of the Torah is the constant theme that human freedom exists *for* the enjoyment of life in a trusting and free relationship with God.

The Feast of Ingathering was a spectacular call to divine enjoyment. It was to be held at the end of the fruit harvest as a celebration of thanksgiving. Families were to enjoy feasting and the novelty of living outdoors in little shelters constructed from fruitful and fragrant green branches (which was why it was also known as the Feast of Tabernacles, or Booths). The children especially would have enjoyed making the booths:

On the first day you are to take branches from luxuriant trees – from palms, willows and other leafy trees – and rejoice before the LORD your God for seven days. Celebrate this as a festival to the LORD for seven days each year. (Lev. 23:40-41 NIV)

They were to rest and do none of their customary work. It was a multi-sensory reminder that once they were once slaves and then homeless travellers on their route out of Egypt – but now God had lovingly placed them in a fruitful land with the freedom to rest and to enjoy living with their Creator. He had given them a peaceful and quiet life for all godliness and holiness. This is the opposite of a killjoy. God loves to see the people rejoicing and so they are warmly reassured:

Be joyful at your festival – you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, and the Levites, the foreigners, the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns. ... For the LORD your God will bless you in all your harvest and in all the work of your hands, and your joy will be complete. (Deut. 16:14,15 NIV)

Human enjoyment of God is socially relevant. We notice here that the abundance of divine enjoyment overflowed to include the immigrants, the poor and those who had no family. God's generosity had given his people good land, and this would inspire generosity to others around them. Their experience of God became a key motivation to use their freedom to treat the poor kindly, to protect the vulnerable and stand up for those who were oppressed as they had been. Such encouragements within the Torah generally do not operate within the sphere of legislative requirement, but simply set out the expected fruit of a thankful *heart*.

So the *human heart* provides the final piece to the jubilee jigsaw itself. In the context of an approaching jubilee, where a plot of land would revert to its original owner, people could take economic advantage of one another by failing to buy or sell at a fair price as measured against the length of time before the next jubilee. But the

appeal not to do so relied chiefly on the expectation that a divinely rescued people would be God-fearing. Similarly the reason they could afford to rest in the jubilee year was because they trusted contentedly in God's provision for them, and they didn't need to work without a break.

The people's heartfelt enjoyment of God provided for their enjoyment of the good land he had given them. Their joy and thankfulness was to overflow in heartfelt generosity to the vulnerable so that in the context of family based personal relationships *everyone* could enjoy the land. Their fear of God protected against artificial pricing, and their trust of God gave them a healthy work-life balance because it provided the base of contentment.

So the role of contentment demonstrates that the trusting human heart can sustain the public good in lean seasons, in that deprivation does not inevitably result in stealing and social disorder – as the prophet Habbakuk experienced:

Though the fig tree does not bud
 and there are no grapes on the vines,
 though the olive crop fails
 and the fields produce no food,
 though there are no sheep in the pen
 and no cattle in the stalls,
 yet I will rejoice in the LORD,
 I will be joyful in God my Saviour.
 (Hab .3:17-18 NIV)

Conclusion

Life to be protected

The Bible's picture of ordered human flourishing offers an attractive and coherent vision for our neighbours. It has stood the test of time throughout human history because in his love our Creator God has carefully designed and structured human life to flourish.

What does this mean for law today? Putting together all our conclusions so far, we can say that the core mandate of public authority is to protect and maintain the public structures of life that God has provided. What is our starting point for this action? As ever, we take our lead from God: we begin law where he begins it. The presumption must be to start with God's own ten-point list for his people's good – as our forefathers have done. So we can repeat and re-group these ten principles and the following serves as an illustration of how this might be done to provide the most basic framework of law and wider public policy in promotion of the public good:

Protection of freedom (first to fourth commandments)

- ▷ Humans should be free under the law to enjoy worshipping their Creator in the way that he commands, and they should be free to speak about him in a way that reflects his honour (Deut. 6:7-11). How is this freedom to be protected by law? The concern of public authority is public order. So historically the freedom of religion has provided an umbrella of freedoms which accord with it, and under which both worshippers and non-worshippers can shelter, such as the freedom of speech, freedom of association and freedom of conscience. The freedom of religion, properly understood, is the keystone for all human freedoms. (By 'properly understood' we mean that this is not a self-defining absolute but sits within the wider biblical framework and is therefore subject to a prohibition on child sacrifices and any other 'religiously demanded' crimes.)
- ▷ Humans should have freedom from slavery to enjoy these God-given freedoms (Deut. 6:6, 12-15). Therefore freedom from slavery should reach beyond merely the abolition of modern-day slavery found across the world – though it should not be less than that, and there is much to be done on that front. But humans should not be compelled to over-work but have the freedom to enjoy rest at least one day in seven.

Protection of family (fifth and seventh commandments)

- ▷ Marriage is a fundamental public unit, a publicly declared life-long exclusive covenant between one man and one woman glued together with sexual union (Deut. 6:18). Marital sex is thus precious and fruitful. Extra-marital sex ultimately harms people because it acts against the human physical, emotional and social design, it undermines marriage and it undermines society. Marriage should be promoted and protected by law.
- ▷ Children should have a father and a mother so they can be blessed in honouring them and parents should have primary responsibility for their children (Deut. 6:16). This provides basic principles for good policies and laws in relation to bioethics, adoption, education and welfare.

Protection of human life (sixth commandment)

- ▷ Human life is the most basic goal of the public good, yet it is fragile and should be protected by law from murder and harm (Deut. 6:17). Government should therefore protect life against violence internally (e.g. by police) and externally (e.g. by armed forces), and prohibit acts such as abortion and euthanasia. In all these areas we recall that the love of the magistrate is first for society corporately, within which, rather than contrary to which, he loves individuals.

Protection of property (eighth and tenth commandments)

- ▷ Ownership of property should be enjoyed contentedly and owners should be protected from theft (Deut. 6:19, 21). This speaks to the protection against robbery in all its forms, and governs the handling of economic regulation. It also reminds us that it is good for every family to have access to productive resources and a part to play in fruitfulness.

Protection of justice (ninth commandment)

- ▷ Truth should govern the work of justice (Deut. 6:19). Witnesses should be required for any conviction. This speaks to the

arrangement of the courts and biblical law shows that people should be considered innocent until proven to be guilty.

These basics are increasingly necessary today. Each simple principle recounted above stands against the flood of contemporary Western culture which seeks to redefine God's structures and calls 'good' 'evil' and 'evil' 'good'. The corridors of power are populated by many who say there is no Creator. As Romans 1:22 delineates, "claiming to be wise, they became fools." In biblical terms, a fool has false confidence in his own wisdom, and when pressures come – such as economic strain or social unrest – he finds himself to be weaker than he thinks. The same can be true of a culture. Today we are moving away from God's good *life* and instead, in our confusion, we are shredding our own fruit before it can flourish, and even pursuing what we now call 'good death'.

So we can love our neighbours in two ways. We can help society arrange itself in accordance with the universal biblical order for flourishing human life, which we have seen throughout this chapter.

Life – more abundantly

But we can also use this vision, as the jubilee was used, to point people to the good news of the Lord from whom it all came and who gives us enjoyment of it all. This is the Creator who entered the cursed creation for its restoration, and who announced the jubilee to his own neighbours when he arrived:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
 because he has anointed me
 to proclaim good news to the poor.
 He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
 and recovery of sight for the blind
 to set the oppressed free,
 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.
 (Luke 4:18-19 NIV)

By his message, all humans everywhere can now participate in an even greater and more joyful experience of divine rescue from slavery than Old Testament Israel.

Jesus taught that all of us are slaves to sin because although we can have freedom to make our own choices, we find our hearts habitually choose many things which harm us (John 8:31-36). But the truth of Christ's jubilee message sets the human heart free on the inside. This enables us to enjoy our political freedom on the outside, which in turn overflows with generous and contented social implications – and ultimately to pursue freedom for those who don't have it.

Jesus said, "I have come that they may have life and that they may have it more abundantly." (John 10:10 NKJV). We can feast on the abundance of his household (Ps. 36:8). This life keeps us going through hard times, and makes us fruitful in many other ways even if the life of blessing pictured by Old Testament Israel is not open to us in this life, for whatever reason – and it finds its complete fulfillment in us only at his return. Jesus is *life*, and we can share in it for eternity because he *died* for us. He is the *good* shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep – the Creator bearing creation's curse as he hung on one of its trees.

We can't miss the relationship between the goodness of creation life and the good news we spread. As Jonathan Chaplin concluded:

Christians need to recover a biblical doctrine of creation from neglect. ... It is a neglected theme but it is the foundation of the gospel, it is the foundation of the Bible. Unless you understand Genesis 1 and 2, the rest of the Bible is diminished in its significance. The point of the gospel is diminished in its significance as well.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

3. Public Good – So what *is* ‘good’ for us?

The **government’s mandate** involves the legal protection and promotion of the good structuring of flourishing life.

- ▷ In the Mosaic law the public good is patterned by free extended families living together on their own fruitful land which they can work, enjoy and pass down to their children. This picture acts as a God-given paradigm from which important underlying principles can be drawn for policy today.
- ▷ Key protections for the public good can be summarised in the legal protection of human freedoms, family, life, property, and an honest process of justice.
- ▷ Although public authority should protect and promote the fruitful structures of life, in itself cannot provide true enjoyment of this life.

The **gospel’s message** tells of Christ who is the life – the source, pattern and goal of abundant life.

- ▷ God, through Christ, is the origin of all life, the provider and definition of all good. He is the creator and the re-creator of human life forever.
- ▷ Christ’s rescue from sin paves the way for abundant life which begins in the heart. This inner life then overflows to bear fruit in family and social life, and ultimately aspires to provide the same social freedoms for humans everywhere.
- ▷ The inner life brought by the great jubilee of the gospel brings joy and contentment which give social stability in times of austerity, and social generosity in times of abundance.