

Choosing Sides

We're witnessing deliberate confusion these days about what is "good." America's intellectual elites state, for example, that ownership of private property is evil. They claim that Christianity is evil because it's a "means of oppression." Denying someone the right to express their mind is good, they say, if that person doesn't hold to their ideology. With smug self-confidence, these elites teach that it's good to be outraged and show anger or hatred at those who offend, even the most trivial speech offenses, but to show tolerance to, or to forgive, the offender is evil.

But the issue of good and evil is vastly more ultimate, and more important to us, than the totalitarian impulses of today's intelligentsia. The contrast between good and evil is a major theme of the Gospel of John; notice all the references in the text to light and dark, to night and day, and to the Father of the Son and the father of lies. See, for just one example, John 3:19. The Incarnation and Advent of the Son is all about this matter of good and evil. So let's explore this issue of good and evil.

God is good. Of course, God is also love, God is holy, God is just and He is sovereign. But the first thing we're told about God on the opening page of the Bible is that God is good, because a good creation can come only from a God who is good. And God expected the humans He created also to be good, reflecting His goodness. And He revealed what the goodness is that He expects.

What happened in the Garden of Eden was the entry of evil into God's good creation. The evil was embodied in the person of Satan, a transcendent being, but it was evil, a force, quality or spirit inimical to God's holiness. God gave His word, but Satan contradicted it. And those first human creatures chose to side with Satan, that personification of evil, thus forfeiting for themselves and their offspring God's intended creation blessing. The issue then was (and still is), Whose word is trustworthy? Whose word is true?

In the course of time, the exact opposite occurred: the entry of good into God's creation. The good was embodied in the person of Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, God Himself incarnate. So now human creatures have to choose: the side of good, or the side of evil. If they choose good, they receive the creation blessing. "Faith in Christ" or "belief in Christ" is choosing the good, taking God's side in His cosmic defeat of evil. A deliberate choice for the good is needed to change sides. The ultimate decision every human must make is, What to do with Jesus? Which is really, What to do with good? In other words, "Which side do I take?" At the end of time, a separation will occur. Those who've taken the side of God will be separated from all the rest who've been content with and preferred the side of Satan. The purpose of life can be reduced to this: choosing who we spend eternity with.

There's a problem intrinsic to this necessary decision and that is, evil is so severely evil that it prevents anyone from ever choosing good. So God, the Creator, exercises His sovereign right to choose, and He aids certain ones to choose good. Thus the salvation that is offered is, in every aspect, beginning to end, a gift. It's freely offered to all, although received by and efficacious for those elect who choose God's side of good. Then, those individuals are expected to demonstrate God's goodness while embodied in an evil world, while immersed in systemic evil. "Goodness" is wanting others to be blessed by God.

No one is not good or evil. No one is in-between. And no one is both. There's only one side or the other for everyone who exists. Everyone by default is already on the side of evil. We must deliberately choose the side of good, identifying with the Person of Jesus, who alone embodies God's goodness, or remain forever on the side of Satan, participating in the embodiment of evil. Eventually, all evil persons must be punished and be eternally banished from the presence of a good God. God cannot simply annihilate evil or make it disappear.

The test that occurred in the Garden, Whose word is so trustworthy that we stake our lives on it? is repeated for every person since creation. The choice is an intensely moral one: Do we choose good or evil. It's moral because our thinking, our behavior, our values, and our world-view, all hinge on our decision. It's

moral also because it involves a relationship with an infinitely holy God. Taking sides means who we belong to. To love God is to love good is to be good (which comes as a gift) and to live good.

Let's think now about the differences between good and evil. What does evil look like? What is good? We need to do this because to too many Christians, goodness is, "I don't steal, I don't murder, I don't commit adultery, and I go to church on Sundays."

Satan told lies in the Garden. Jesus, in contrast, told truth. So "evil" is not merely doing what is immoral, it's also participating in that which is untrue. Truth is God's revealed truth, revealed in His written Word and by Jesus' words. (Truth is not merely that which corresponds to reality, although it certainly is that too.) Believing lies identifies evil just as much as immoral acts. Our society today is saturated with lies, lies about what we should believe, what values we should hold, and what behavior is good and what isn't.

In the Garden, Satan exercised power. Jesus, in contrast, came in weakness. Lust for power comes from a proud spirit. Weakness, in contrast, reflects a humble spirit. Thus evil can be identified by how power over others is sought as well as all the ways that pride expresses itself. Power is gained and held, for example, by being outraged at those who disagree and by hurting those who oppose. Pride is especially in evidence by an attitude of independence from God, as reflected by a life-style or world view that's independent of Scripture. Good is expressed by humble dependence on God, that is, on His revealed Word, to know how to think and how to live. Weakness is expressed by humble and loving tolerance of offenses and by forgiving offenders.

We can take this further. In the Garden, Satan claimed to have knowledge that was superior to what God had revealed. Jesus' knowledge derived from the written Word that God had revealed. Everyone today who knows better than what's revealed in Scripture also is participating in evil. Satan also had contempt for humans. He was indifferent to the consequences resulting from their defection from God. Jesus, in contrast, had self-sacrificing love for those He came to rescue. Indifference is contempt is hatred is evil. Love for others expresses goodness.

Satan's intent in the Garden was that the first couple should serve him, not God. Peter says that we're to be *effective* and *productive* in our knowledge of Christ (2 Peter 1:8); he obviously assumes that Christianity isn't just sitting in a pew on Sunday mornings but rather is serving God in some way. Serving God is good. Serving Satan, which is our default stance if we're not purposely serving God, is evil.

Satan's acts in the Garden were crassly and brazenly disloyal to his Creator and Sovereign, to whom he was responsible. So not being loyal to God in all the ways that loyalty can be expressed, is also evil. Faithful, enduring adherence to all that Scripture teaches and commands, however, is good.

God has evidently withdrawn His unique blessing from our nation. So evil is being expressed now as we've never seen before. I've heard that "protestors" are now burning Bibles. We may witness even more blatant evil as Satan and his demons increasingly take control of our country. This means Christians in America can no longer depend on society's civility to be "good." We must instead – each one of us – deliberately express God's revealed goodness, or be swept away by the currents. It happened to the church in Germany 85 years ago, when social and political forces co-opted it, and it can happen here.

If we're on the side of good, let's be absolutely sure that we're expressing it conforming to God's own personal goodness and according to His revealed will. That means we have to not only know Scripture, we have to live it.