

## Guilt and Despair

God is dangerous. That's because He's holy and I'm not. I therefore have – and *know* that I have – real guilt before Him. To resolve this, I can (1) deny God's existence, which is only partially effective. Or, (2) I can identify with the collective, that is, with society in the aggregate, so I'm no longer personally accountable to God. Or, (3) I can suppose that I myself am God. Let's discuss these three very bad options And then we'll think about what it all means, and look at a 4<sup>th</sup> option, the very best one of all.

(1) This approach is futile. It depends on Darwinian evolution, which is merely human speculation, a guess at best. If evolution is true, we're only animals, so nothing matters ultimately and so, for the here and now, only power is important. And if we can't have that, then sex, wealth, or fame will do. People who deny God's existence have to ignore all the deeper issues of life, such as, Why even live? Why do good? Why not do evil? Who's to say what's good? Etc. Ideals such as charity, compassion, trust, striving to be good, etc, come to us from God. Denying God means these ideals disappear too. (And that's what's happening right now in the Western world.) Why should I be good? I only need to be as good as is needed to function in society; privately, being good is irrelevant. In a Godless world, existence is ultimately meaningless, as are values and morality. Nothing is or can be beautiful; beauty is merely a social convention. It's possible to pretend that we have no guilt; sure, the conscience can be hardened, but that we have no guilt is a self-deception. The more we jettison God from our thoughts, the more despair sets in.

(2) This approach is equally futile. We may try to follow certain societally generated and accepted "rules" and live by societally determined values and morality. But civilization isn't self-sustaining, and those rules and values are in constant flux. Neither are our own individual sets of values and moral awareness able to be upheld by any standard. Society can't sustain our personal values unless they happen also to be the values of society. So what happens is, society determines what's good or not. The individual no longer determines them, and neither does God, who's been banished from society. Thus we wind up living as a collective. The collective is accountable to God, not me personally, and so my guilt is diluted. That's what I may want. But the individual, having no responsibility except to the collective, loses all inherent value. So the system is fiercely dehumanizing. Further, there's really no such thing as an autonomous society; that's an illusion. Someone has to be in leadership position, which means there's a non-ending struggle for power and for survival. The result isn't just Marxism, worse, it's Stalinism. And gulags and terror. All individuals wind up expendable. So more despair, unending despair.

(3) If I am God, I can live as I please. But this is futile too, because the guilt remains. It may even be worse because of all the ways that I choose to live. What to do? To assuage the awareness of our sins and the despair that results, people go to church. That may involve performing certain rituals or carrying out certain religious "duties." These supposedly make God less dangerous, while leaving us still in control. (We *outrageously* fail to grasp God's call on our lives or, worse, we know God's call but ignore it.) So what we've done is create an "established Christendom" (Soren Kierkegaard's term) that replaces Christ and His demands on us. This is well exemplified by our celebration of Christmas in which we see God as a weak, dependent child, not a suffering, selfless Savior. So Christianity is watered down. And God is pacified, tamed, manageable, made less "dangerous." No fear of the Lord! No seeking Christ either. We have our own lives to lead, so God needs to be just kept safely on the shelf. (And of course we know that He's there when needed.) Our society does not know God, so we content ourselves with living according to society's norms or by our own lights. This option gets worse quickly: We can't know what's coming, and we can't assume things will always be the same as they have been. The traditions inherited from Established Christendom/nominal Christianity and liberal American values may disappear tomorrow. Anarchy or despotic tyranny could be imminent for all we know. And with the loss of Established Christendom goes our supposed protection from a holy God. Despair lurks.

God created a world in which there are binary opposites. We have to acknowledge these opposites and live with them. For example, there are good/evil; beauty/ugly; truth/lies; rational/irrational, and more. Evil is understood in relation to good, falsity is in relation to truth, etc. We identify one by identifying the other. Lies are only lies in contrast to truth. If truth is done away with, then there are no lies; there's only the way that it is. Same with beauty and ugliness, good and evil. [The project of modernity is to do away with truth, so that the lies that those with power impose on the rest of us can't be challenged.]

God is holy and He is good. We know this from the revelation He's given us, but we also can see that He is good from observing the world that He made. That God is holy is also intuitive: at creation, we were given moral sensibility and by that we are aware of sin and holiness. *And guilt*. Because God is good necessarily means there must be evil – not just potential evil or abstract evil, but real, personal evil. Evil that hurts. Evil that causes guilt before a holy God. In the contest between good and evil, nothing is gained by denying the existence of evil or by collapsing the two, as if neither good nor evil is really true. The right approach is simple: do good and eschew evil. As if it were that simple!

More important questions however are, Where did good come from? Where did evil come from? With whom do we align ourselves? These are ultimate issues, exceedingly important issues that we all must answer. Ignoring them is foolishness in the extreme. Why? Because God is dangerous.

If we align ourselves with God, He offers forgiveness from evil and the capacity both to do good and to overcome evil. In His profligate goodness, God has made every provision necessary for us (sinners all) to be rescued from our sins and from the extreme danger of being in His presence. There's more, much more in the provision, but it's freely offered to all, to anyone who wants it. And so . . . Despair yields to joy and thanksgiving. And guilt is replaced by love, love for God and for what He loves and wills. Evil doesn't vanish, it can't. But it can be defeated, so that good, God's goodness, alone pervades the world He made.

There's also the issue of truth. What is true? How can we know it? Truth isn't merely that which corresponds to reality (although it is that), truth has an inherent moral quality or component. Therefore, because of the presence of evil, lies exist. So by defeating evil, truth alone remains. In the present era, only that which comes from a good and holy God can be known to be true. Anything, *anything* deriving from sinful humanity should necessarily be suspect. Precisely because God is dangerous yet good, He has provided revelation so that we can know how to think and how to live. And because He is holy, we can know that that revelation is truthful.

So (4), the only true and reasonable option: Guilt and despair should drive us to God and to the Bible. And to the Gospel of all that's been provided and is freely available to us in the Person of Jesus, the Jewish King/Messiah. Because by trusting in Jesus and how at Calvary He rescued us from the danger of exposure to a holy and immense God, we have forgiveness of sins, the removal of all guilt, power to live a righteous life and overcome sin, and the promise of blessing that lasts for an eternity. God is dangerous to those who ignore Him. But to those who know Him (and He can be known, indeed, wants to be known, in the Scriptures), He's the greatest reality there is.

What this Sunday School lesson has attempted to do is demonstrate the futility and folly of anyone trying to live apart from God and from God's will as it's revealed in the Bible. And to show that trusting in Jesus, the Jewish King/Messiah, is the most rational and important thing anyone can do in life. We were created as moral beings, and that necessarily means we must – *must* – submit to what God has graciously provided. God's motive in all this? Love. He loves His creatures with an infinitely deep and lasting love. We can leave to God the issue of the justice of what He has done. Likewise the matter of the ultimate defeat of evil. That's not our business.

But now there's more. Those who avail themselves of God's loving provision are no longer free to live as they please. Rather, they have placed themselves under obligation to live according to God's will and to serve His purposes. The same Bible that makes the Gospel offer reveals that those who receive it have these responsibilities. Refusing to bear them can mean either of two possibilities: without any excuse, such persons face a God who is to them still dangerous; or assuming that they entered into God's grace simply was false, a self-deception.

God has so ordered His creation and has so made us that we can't escape His existence. Nor can we dodge our responsibility to Him. But His attitude toward us is love, and that love should move us to want to know Him. To know Him is to love Him and to enjoy Him forever.