

Should We Fear Evil?

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Preacher: Mark Chew

[0 : 0 0] Starting tonight, what I want to do is just introduce our series, because you may be wondering why we're doing this series. After all, don't we have enough bad news already on TV? And shouldn't the church be focusing on the positive? How to do good? How to alleviate suffering?

Well, the answer to that is yes. And in a sense, that's the aim of the series as well, in that it is overwhelmingly positive. We don't have a morbid fascination with the dark side of life or take pleasure in it. No, we're on the side of goodness and blessing. But on the other hand, the reality is that whether we like it or not, evil and suffering occupy significant parts of our lives.

They're common in society. And even if you are not personally impacted at the moment, you probably know family or friends that are. And there's every possibility that you might be down the track. And further to that, thanks to technology or no thanks, the evil from afar overseas now streams into our homes via the TV, via the internet. And so whether we want to or not, they impact how we perceive reality. And so the aim of this series is to really think a little deeper on these things and see how we may best respond to them rather than just instinctively.

Now, often when we have talks like this about God and suffering and evil, we tend to focus on the philosophical conundrums. The classic question being, if God is all good, all powerful and all loving, then why is there so much evil in this world? Or turn it the other way around, how can there be a good, all powerful and loving God when there's so much evil? These are important questions and we'll touch on some of them in due course. But I want to just say that that's not where our focus will be.

Because I don't want to get down, get bogged down with the intellectual or just the intellectual. Rather, what I want to do is focus on the practical. How do we live in light of evil and suffering?

[2 : 1 1] How do we make choices that really make sense, that really work? So with that, by way of introduction, let's get stuck into the first topic. And hopefully you've got a handout on your way in, which will help you to follow as well. Now, most people have a gut instinct when it comes to evil. That is, whenever they see or hear something evil, they often don't need to analyze or ponder over it. Instead, we have an inbuilt mechanism, a moral conscience that prompts us to react instinctively. So when we heard about the murder of Jill Ma a few years ago, or of that 17-year-old girl down in Doncaster a few weeks ago, there was really no need to think about whether it was right or wrong. We just recoiled, didn't we, with horror and anger.

Now, not everything is so clear-cut, of course. Sometimes people disagree on whether something's evil or not. Like prostitution, for instance. Now, some of you will think it's evil, but there are others that don't. And even when they think it's evil, they may not agree with you on its source.

So some would say that it's the sex workers who are evil because they're the perpetrators. But others would say, no, no, no, they're being exploited. No, the evil people are the customers or the brothel owners. But notice that even if we don't agree on the specifics, evil as a concept only makes sense if we acknowledge that there are moral absolutes, that there is some standard of goodness which we believe is universally applicable.

evil. We may not all agree on what that good looks like, but in each of our minds, we have an idea, a way of life, of what life should be like. Not just for ourselves, but for everyone as well.

And it is within this framework that evil is defined as the failure to meet up to this ideal. It's when this ideal is deliberately distorted or perverted.

[4 : 1 7] So evil, you see, isn't a thing in itself. It's not like a tangible quality or substance. Evil only exists where there is good. If good exists, good can exist without evil, yeah, but not the other way around. Because evil is cannibalistic. It needs something good to pervert or destroy. So as an example, sex is good when it's consensual.

I mean, sex is good, morally good, not pleasurable good. Okay, sex is good when it's consensual, when it has the consent of two willing parties. And so rape is evil. Precisely because one of the conditions that makes sex good, the willingness of both parties is violated. But if no such condition exists, no such good exists, then there wouldn't even be a concept of rape, would there?

And now when I speak of good here and throughout the night, I'm referring specifically to moral goodness, right and wrong, the way things ought to be. I'm not talking about things pertaining to taste, like whether your lamb chops tasted good or not. I'm talking about moral perfection.

Now, so strong is our sense of morality, of good and evil, that we actually want the freedom to live by our views of right and wrong, and good and evil. And what we fear greatly is having someone else's view of good and evil imposed on us. Hence, for example, we don't mind if Sharia law, that Sharia law is the law that Muslims live under, we don't mind if Sharia law is enforced in a country like Saudi Arabia. But many Australians will be fearful were it to be implemented here. Because if you're not a Muslim, then there will be things in Islam, things which Islam defines as good, which you wouldn't agree with. And living under Sharia law, you would have to actually do or accept what you may consider as evil. And at the same time, there may be good things that you want to do, but you'll be restricted from doing under Sharia law because it's considered evil. We're fearful of that happening. And I have to say, it probably happens on a smaller scale as well, for example, with things like school. So parents will pull their kids out of certain schools or religious classes. Why? Because they fear that their children are being taught a view of good or evil, which is different to what they believe. And so whenever we have any influence at all, we always seek to impose our view of morality. We want to order our world according to what we believe to be right or wrong. And so we should, in one sense. So at the most micro level, this happens with the family. In our house, for instance, honesty is a good I value highly, so much so that I deal very severely with lying. Often the punishment for lying about a small misbehavior is much more severe than being truthful about a big misbehavior.

And if you think about it, this sort of thing goes on at every level of society. So from families to schools to companies, and then eventually to the whole society. However they are made, the rules that govern a place reflect a view of morality. And in fact, if you think about it, rules are what defines what's good or evil within each community or society. And as humans, whenever we see evil, a breaking of the rules, a distortion or perversion of what is good, our response is always to try and do something about it. Either to stop the evil being done, or if the laws are not right, to change the laws. We feel compelled to act, because we want to return the community, the situation back to what is good. And so as we move on to the next point, I think that humans in general respond in three ways when they see evil. The first way is that they try to eradicate evil and to do it with force. And so that's what we want the police to do, right? Seek and root out the bad people in society. The drug dealers, the radical Islamists, the sexual predators.

[8 : 44] And then on the global scale, I mean, I think that's what all the Western countries have been trying to do with terrorism. Sending troops to the Middle East to combat and root out Islamic militants.

But we've seen the limits of that, haven't we? Eradication by force doesn't work. Fifteen years ago, if you were around then, most of us would be, the world leaders thought that Saddam Hussein was the evil that needed to be eradicated. He was part of the axis of evil, according to George Bush. But many analysts today now look back and say, having got rid of him, it's actually created the very environment for ISIS to flourish, both in Iraq and then also in Syria.

And it's sort of the same reasoning with the war on drugs, let's say, in Australia. So 30 years ago, I don't know, David, you could tell me better than I do, that the drug that was causing greatest harm in society was probably something like heroin.

And I'm not sure whether that's still the case now, but even if we've got that under control, other drugs have taken its place, hasn't it? Cocaine, meth, and then now the latest thing is ice. It's an epidemic, according to what we hear on the news. And I'm sure after ice, there will be something else. Even if we eradicate ice, something else will turn up. And so there's a line in Tolkien's Lord of the Rings trilogy, which I like, which reflects this principle. He says, always after a defeat and respite, the shadow, which is his poetic term that he uses for evil, the shadow takes another shape and grows again. Evil always comes back with a vengeance.

Now, for me, though, what's most frightening about using force is that often it's the very ones that are charged with eradicating evil that end up perpetrating evil as well. So you just have to think of

law enforcement turning corrupt, police brutality, torture of prisoners of war. And even as parents, right, I have to admit that sometimes we have all the best intentions where we want to discipline our children for their good, but then we so easily end up just turning into, turning our discipline into unjustified anger or undue harshness. And so evil flourishes at both ends, where there's total anarchy, lawlessness, and then people just run amok. But also when there's totalitarianism, that is, when one person like a dictator or one group of people have unfettered power, evil flourishes then as well. And you just have to look at communism, look at the countries around the world which have had dictators. So I think trying to eradicate evil by force doesn't work, not completely.

[11 : 31] So now the second way that humans respond to evil is through education. So social justice campaigners and activists will say that if only we could educate people and show them the benefits of doing good, then we would eliminate evil. The evil that exists isn't in the individual themselves, it's in the structures of society which deprive and discriminate. And I think as we heard some of the people talking in the Vox Pop, that's sort of their view. So train people so that they can get a job and they will turn away from a life of crime. Don't ostracize new migrants and they wouldn't be radicalized to turn to organizers like IS to fight for them. Now some of the aspirations are actually really good, really admirable, and some people do achieve good outcomes with education. But again, I have to say that that's no guarantee of success. Education alone does not remove all evil. It's not the answer.

Well, here's a case in point. A few months ago, the paper published a story about this Australian doctor. Some of you might remember. He's now working for IS in Syria. Now you have to say he's obviously educated.

He's obviously had opportunities. I think he's worked around Australia. He's obviously had opportunities in Australia, and yet he's been radicalized. Well, here's one example. But more generally, we've seen, haven't we, that educated people in the news, they do evil. Judges commit murder.

Prominent entertainers are convicted of sexual abuse. And even priests and pastors, as we've seen in the Royal Commission, all these educated people. They knew that what they were doing was wrong. And yet, they did evil anyway. So education by itself doesn't help you. And I guess, if you're willing to be honest, you only have to look within yourself. How are we to do wrong, even when we know it's wrong?

And how we can't stop ourselves, even if we tried. We're all capable of evil. And that may sound harsh, but remember what my definition of evil is. It's not just the committing of heinous crimes. No, it's the perversion or the distortion of what's good. It's violating what's right. And all of us do that, whether we're educated or not. And I think that's why many people in despair simply default to the third response. And that's to insulate themselves by withdrawing into a protective wall, whether it's physical or relational, so that we can put up defenses to keep evil at bay. So we lock our doors and install security alarms. We don't allow our children to walk home from school. We don't allow them to go to public toilets by themselves. And then relationally, we become very selective in who we trust, who we open up to, who we love. And at one level, I mean, that's sensible because, yeah, there's real evil out there. There's no point denying that. But again, where does that leave us?

[14 : 51] Because the only guarantee with this method of not being touched by evil is to be an island, to live in total isolation and not just insulation. You cut off from everyone else, everyone that could possibly do evil to you. But is that really how we want to live? Is that our vision of the good, where people are cut off from one another? And I have to say that even if we're content to do that, we've still got a problem, haven't we? Because as I've said earlier already, evil isn't just out there, is it? Evil is in here as well. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, which is a sort of Soviet writer, he put it this way. He said, if only it was so simple. If only there were evil people somewhere in seriously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being, and who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart? This very fact sort of dawned on me one night as a teenager. I didn't know Solzhenitsyn at that age, but on reflection, that's exactly what he said.

I was in my room, and I was really upset that night, because mum and dad had been fighting. And as fights go, this wasn't even a bad fight. I mean, my parents were Christians, we love each other, but as in any normal marriage, it was a conflict nevertheless. And I was sick and tired of it. I could see so clearly how they could resolve their conflict, and so frustrated that they couldn't. They were hurting each other. They were being evil. If I could put it that way, being evil to each other.

But, you know, as I sat there really angry with myself, with them, it suddenly dawned on me that actually I was no different. That I myself was capable of doing those same things. And actually, if I started thinking about all the other evil that was going on around the world, I realized that I was capable of all that too.

That put in the same situation and under the same influences, I'm not sure I would act any differently. Have you ever had that terrifying thought of the evil that you're capable of doing?

[17 : 10] And that you might actually do it. The line between good and evil runs right through the human heart. Right through each and every one of us. And so, if that's the case, what can we do?

How can we run from ourselves? Well, I want you to hold that thought for a while, because as we turn to the next point, I want to explain to you how God responds to evil. Including the evil in us.

And the God I'm talking specifically about is the one who reveals himself in the Bible. Now, you may be visiting tonight, and you may not believe that he exists. Because that's okay. But I just want you to consider the person of Jesus in the Bible.

The one who is called God's son. And I want you to consider his crucifixion. His death on the cross. Which most people would take to be a historic fact. Because what the Bible tells us is that it's at the cross where we find God's clearest response to evil.

For what God does with evil there, how he defeats evil permanently and totally, is not to use force to eradicate it, not education. And he doesn't insulate himself from it either.

[18 : 19] Rather, on the cross, God exposes himself, or his son exposes himself to the full force of evil. Allowing evil to do its worst.

Now, if there's anyone who doesn't deserve to die like it, it's Jesus. Jesus, of all people on earth, Jesus does not deserve what he got. And much less the horrible things that he suffered before his death.

He spent his whole life living for others. Serving them, healing them, teaching them. And yet, what did he get in return? He was betrayed by his friends. He was deserted by his friends.

Falsely accused. Physically abused. He was denied a due process at his trial. And wrongly convicted. And then at the end of it all, the final agony, he had a slow and painful death on the cross.

All the while forsaken and separated from the one he loved, his father. And yet, and yet, as he hung on the cross, seemingly defeated by evil, the exact opposite was happening.

[19 : 21] God was at that point achieving his decisive victory over evil. So, if you read Colossians chapter 2 and verse 15, and that's up on the screen there, it says this, that having disarmed the powers and authorities, God, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

It was on the cross that God triumphs over evil, making a public spectacle of the authorities. That's everything that's opposed to God. Henri Blocher is a French guy.

I think I've got his pronunciation right. He's written an excellent book called *Evil and the Cross*. I highly recommend that you read it if you can. And he describes what happens on the cross like this, and I'll quote it in full.

He says, On the cross, evil is conquered as evil, because God turns it back upon itself. He makes the supreme crime, the murder of the only righteous person, the very operation that abolishes sin. No more complete victory could be imagined. God responds in the indirect way that is perfectly suited to the ambiguity of evil. He entraps the deceiver in his own wiles.

[20 : 34] Evil, like a judoist, takes advantage of the path of good, which it perverts. The Lord, like a supreme champion, replies by using the very grip of the opponent.

So on the cross, God overcomes evil with love. As the greatest act of evil was being done, so was the greatest act of love being displayed through the willing sacrifice of his son.

Jesus himself said in John chapter 15 and verse 13, Greater love has no one than this, to lay down one's life for one's friend. Now people sometimes ask, why if God is all-powerful, he wouldn't rid the world of evil at once?

Is he powerless? Is he unmoved by evil? Well friends, the answer is, no, he's not, because God has acted. But he hasn't acted the way we want, by force.

Rather, he's acted on the cross. Have you ever stopped to think how you yourself would fare if God indeed used force?

[21 : 51] Are you confident that you would survive unscathed, untouched by God's righteous anger? I'm not sure anyone would be left standing if God did do that. Rather, as we've read in that parable tonight, God holds off pulling up the weeds.

Why? For the sake of the wheat. He's giving the wheat every chance to grow. And by wheat here, it's not those people who are good by nature. No, wheat are those people who put their trust in Jesus, who depend on the cross for their victory.

He's allowing the wheat to believe, to grow in faith. And then one day will come the time for pulling up the weeds.

And so I think for the Christian, there are really two prongs to how we respond to evil. And each actually are found in a psalm. We only got a chance to read one tonight. But we'll look at both psalms.

The first prong is found in Psalm 51. And that's to repent and plead for God's forgiveness. So Psalm 51 on the screen there says, Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love, according to your great compassion.

[23 : 01] Blot out my transgressions, wash away all my iniquity, and cleanse me from sin. For I know my transgressions and my sin is always before you. Against you, you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.

So here, a Christian responds to the evil within through repentance. Through pleading for God's forgiveness. We can't run from the evil within or improve our way out of it.

Only the cross can deal adequately with it by turning evil upon itself through the Son's sacrifice. And so anyone can use those very words in Psalm 51 to pray a prayer of repentance to God and find forgiveness waiting when we do.

But then having dealt with the evil within, the Christian responds to the evil from without by relying on God, just as Psalm 23 says.

The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. And then the verse I want to focus on, verse 4. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil.

[24 : 10] So that's the answer to the question for tonight. For you are with me, your rod and your staff, they comfort me. And so there's no need as Christians to insulate ourselves.

We can actually love others the way Jesus has loved us. We may not be taken out of the darkest valley. That is, evil may still be done to us.

But God says we needn't fear because His very presence is with us. We will dwell in the house of the Lord forever, it says at the end of that Psalm.

So friends, you may be struggling to understand tonight how there can be such evil in the world if God exists. But I actually want you to consider the alternative.

How do you even begin to respond to all this evil if there's no God? What answers do you have to solve the evil that is in this world, that's a reality in this world?

[25 : 10] For me, there's only one answer that works and that's Jesus and what He did on the cross. For only at the cross is evil truly defeated. both the evil within us and the evil that surrounds us.

Thank you. Thank you. For more information, fear is right.