

“Good and Evil (Wicked and Righteous)”
Psalms 1, 10, 14, 36, 37, 52, 73 and Proverbs 29
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Have you ever heard of Edwin Thomas, a premier Shakespearean actor who was one of America’s celebrity a-list in the 1850s and 60s? He won critical acclaim for his performance in *Hamlet* in New York and the approval of the tough British critics for his work in tragedies on the stage. When it came to tragedy on the stage, Edwin Thomas was in a select group. When it comes to tragedy in real life, the same could be said as well. Edwin had two brothers, John and Junius, who were both actors. In 1863, the three siblings united their talents to perform *Julius Caesar*. Edwin’s brother John took the role of Brutus. He would reenact his role as an assassin in real life two years later.

As the story goes, Edwin was awaiting a train when a young man, pressed by the crowd, lost his footing and fell between the platform and a moving train. Without hesitation, Edwin jumped forward onto the ground, reached through the feet of the people, and grabbed the collar of the man who had fallen. Within a fraction of a second, Edwin yanked him out from under the train and sure death.

After the sighs of relief, the young man recognized the famous Edwin. Edwin, however, did not recognize the young man he had rescued. That knowledge came weeks later in a letter that he carried in his pocket to the grave. It was a letter from an army general thanking Edwin for saving the life of Abraham Lincoln’s son, Robert Todd Lincoln.

The story does not end there. Several months later...Edwin’s brother John quietly stole into the rear of a box in Ford’s Theater in Washington, D.C. and fired a bullet into the head of Abraham Lincoln. Yes, the last name of the brothers was Booth.

Edwin was never the same after that night. Shame from his brother’s crime drove him into retirement. What an interesting twist of history that while one brother killed the president, the other brother saved the president’s son.

Edwin Thomas Booth and John Wilkes Booth. They had the same father, mother, and profession; yet, one chose life and the other death. This story is not unique. Abel and Cain, both sons of Adam – Abel chose God; Cain chose murder. And God let him. Abraham and Lot, both pilgrims in Canaan. Abraham chose God; Lot chose Sodom. And God let him. David and Saul, both kings of Israel. David chose God; Saul chose power. And God let him. Peter and Judas, both denied their Lord. Peter sought mercy; Judas sought death. And God let him.

In every age of history, the truth is revealed: God allows us to make our own choices. We can turn toward evil or we can choose to be led in righteousness and become the person that God wants us to be. We will revisit this concept of choice a little later.

As we take on the complex discussion of good and evil, it is appropriate to ask a few clarifying questions:

1. **What truly is good?** Here is the bedrock and unchanging truth: Only God is truly good. In fact, Jesus tells us that “No one is good—except God alone.” (Luke 18:19) Daniel 9:14 says, “The Lord our God is righteous in everything He does.” There is no goodness apart from Him. Being good and unchangeable, He only ever does good; where His will is done it cannot help but be good.
2. **What then is evil?** Evil is the opposite of good, meaning everything and everyone that opposes God. All God’s angels when originally created were good and perfect, including Lucifer. But God gave them a free will to obey Him and remain good or to disobey Him and become evil. Lucifer, being lifted up with pride over his beauty, sought to be equal with God and so iniquity or evil was found in him. He was ejected from heaven and a third of the angels followed him.” (Ezekiel 28:15-17; Isaiah 14:13-24)
3. **Did God create evil?** No, He did not create evil. There was no such thing as evil in His original creation. God’s creation was perfect and according to Genesis 1:31, “God saw all that He had made, and it was very good.”

God gave man free will to choose either good or evil. While God gave Adam and Eve freedom in the garden and with it the responsibility to tend and care for it, one tree was off limits. God specifically told Adam and Eve to not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, “for when you eat from it you will surely die.” (Genesis 2:17). They chose to believe Satan’s lies instead of God’s truth and evil entered the world.

As we studied our assigned Scriptures this week, we saw that Psalm 1 presented life’s two roads – the life of the faithful person is contrasted with the life of the faithless person. We know righteous men, those who diligently try to obey God’s will, are blessed. Their happy condition is like a healthy, fruit-bearing tree with strong roots and God promises to watch over them. Psalm 16:11 tells us that the righteous will be shown the path of life; in God’s presence is fullness of joy; at His right hand are pleasures forevermore. God has a path and it is a good road to take.

Everything true about the righteous man – stable as a tree, continual life and nourishment, fruitful, alive, and prosperous – is not so for the ungodly. The wicked – those who don't trust and obey God have meaningless lives that blow away like dust. (Psalm 1:4)

Verse six provides a fitting summary of this chapter: "For the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the ungodly shall perish."

In the Grind of Compromise, Chuck Swindoll shares that the author of Psalm 1, who is unknown, tells us to resist the slightest temptation. Swindoll reminds us of the dangers of compromise. He wrote, "...compromising with wrong, allows the slow-moving tentacles of evil to wrap themselves around us squeezing the joys and rewards of obedience from our lives. It happens so silently, so subtly, we hardly realize it's taking place. Like an enormous oak that has decayed for years from within and then suddenly falls, those who permit the eroding grind of compromise can expect an ultimate collapse."

The psalmist describes the one who chooses to live a righteous life; the one who consciously resists the subtle inroads of compromise. He envisions a person who remains wary of anything that might erode commitment to a godly life.

In Proverbs 6, God lists specific things He hates. I will highlight the most frequently occurring sins as they appear in the remaining psalms from our lesson this week, which are full of references to those evil practices and attitudes. Since we are to love what God loves and hate what God hates, here is an abbreviated list of those sins which I unlovingly refer to as my hate list.

1. Pride – the attitude that overvalues self and undervalues others including God
2. A lying and deceitful tongue
3. Hands that shed innocent blood – In own mind, I grouped sins such as hurting others and taking advantage of the poor and weak in this category.
4. Evildoers who carry out evil deeds and plot against the righteous
5. The greedy who are prosperous
6. The foolish who revile, disgrace or even deny the existence of God

Psalms 10 and 73 are two psalms that we studied this week that deal with the sin of greed. In Psalm 10, the psalmist, who is probably David, lamented the seeming prosperity the wicked enjoy. He wrote that the ways of the wicked are always prosperous even though they revile the Lord. (Psalm 10:3, 5)

In Psalm 73, the Psalmist Asaph confessed in verse 3 that he “envied the arrogant when he saw the prosperity of the wicked.” He continued sharing his concern in verse 12, when he described the wicked who are “always free of care, they go on amassing wealth.”

Have you ever wanted to trade places with someone who was wealthy? I live on a hill in what I consider to be a middle-class home. I have what is called an obstructed view as I look straight out my back door. But what clearly greets me each morning are houses to the right of my property and across a small ravine that one could categorize as huge homes that are a little less than mansions. At one time, I envied the people who owned those houses as the sun rose each day and those very large homes literally glowed in the morning light. It seemed as though I was constantly reminded that my house was not good enough. Then God allowed me to travel to Kenya on an Eastside mission trip where I made home visits to people who live in small shanties with dirt floors in the Mathare Valley – one of the largest slums in the world by our standards. That experience took the envy right out of my heart. I am amazed at the way God transformed my heart and continues to work with it!

The wealth of the wicked looks so inviting sometimes, right? I know that one day the wealthy people who do not know the Lord will wish they could trade places with those who have God’s eternal wealth.

The author of Psalm 10, expressed his concern about the wicked who flourished financially and went unpunished for their evil deeds. The psalmist began his song with an attitude of despair that God seemed to be hidden in times of trouble, but reached the conclusion with confidence that our God reigns forever and he acknowledged that justice would be done in God’s way and in His timing.

Asaph expressed his faith and understanding of God’s justice at the end of Psalm 73. Verses 16-17 say, “When I tried to understand all this, it troubled me deeply till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny.” We know that the wealth of the wicked suddenly loses its power at death, and the rewards for the good suddenly take on eternal value.

As we turn to Psalm 14, we see that David wrote about the sad condition of the man who rejects God. “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’” The true atheist is either foolish or wicked – foolish because he ignores the evidence that God exists, or wicked because he refuses to live by God’s truths. How foolish it must seem to God when people say there is no God.

In David's eyes, the nonbeliever denied what was clearly evident. Don't miss the full impact of the words in verse 1, "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.'" The phrasing of "says in his heart" informs us that it is possible for one to say in his mind that there is a God, yet deny it in his heart and lifestyle. One may believe in God in theory, yet be a practical atheist in the way he lives.

There are powerful arguments for the existence of God. In the opinion of pastor and author Jon Courson, "The person who claims to be an atheist or an agnostic does so not because of intellectual struggle but because of rebellion – not wanting God to rule over him or her." There is plain evidence that there is a God: evidence in both creation and human conscience that Paul described in Romans. The fact that some men insist on denying the existence of God does not erase God from the universe; it instead speaks to their own standing as fools. As Paul wrote in Romans 1:22, "Professing to be wise, they became fools." So, they come up with foolish theories to rid themselves of their accountability to God.

Our God hates deceit. As we move on to Psalms 36 and 37, we find verses that focus on the sins of deceit which include the plotting, and scheming of those who are evil. In Psalm 36:3, we see that those who are wicked and deceitful "fail to act wisely or do good. Even on their beds they plot evil; they commit themselves to a sinful course and do not reject what is wrong."

In Psalm 37, the wicked carry out their evil ways when they act upon their wicked schemes (verse 7). "The wicked plot against the righteous and gnash their teeth at them." (verse 12)

We know that "taming the tongue" can be a constant struggle. James 3:6-8 tells us that, "The tongue is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body...no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison."

With those cautionary words, we turn to Psalm 52 which has much to say about the last sin on my created hate list and that is the "lying tongue."

When David wrote this psalm, he thought of Doeg, the Edomite, and the evil report he took to King Saul. At Saul's command, in the town of the priests, Doeg had murdered 85 priests who were not trained for battle including the men, women, children, cattle, donkeys, and sheep. David points to the destruction that resulted from Doeg's words, as well as his evil heart, mind, and life that caused his tongue to work deceitfully "like a sharp razor." (Psalm 52:2) The Bible tells us the wicked love evil rather than good,

falsehood rather than speaking the truth. They love every harmful word from their deceitful tongues. (Psalm 52:3-4)

It is fitting that we observe the instruction that comes to us through Proverbs 29 as we complete our study of Scripture on good and evil. This proverb revisits all of the wickedness and sins that are on my hate list, and then some. It also includes the actions of the righteous who build God's kingdom as they follow His will.

Verse 1 presents us with the warning that the stubborn, rebellious man who does not repent of his wickedness will suddenly be destroyed. This is the man who thinks little of God's merciful patience and assumes judgment will never come for his continual rejection of God's wisdom.

Then, from my perspective, the proverb becomes very timely for us. Verse 2 tells us that, "when the righteous thrive, the people rejoice; when the wicked rule, the people groan." Jon Courson explains verse 2 in these words: "The reason people rejoice when the righteous are in authority is because righteous results in peace and safety whereas the result of wickedness is turmoil and danger."

Also referring to verse 2, David Guzik states, "The community or the nation suffers when the wicked rule. Lawlessness increases and freedoms diminish. The rule of the wicked is bad for both the righteous and the wicked in the community or nation." These passages certainly bring to mind the current condition of our country.

Verse 4 speaks of man's jaded judgment based on bribery. Bribes destroy the foundations of fairness and equality before the law, while the rich and devious prosper.

Verse 5 touches upon the importance of using true and honest words rather than flattery. We are warned that the flatterer does not flatter merely to please someone, but to deceive that person and profit himself.

To illustrate this point, J. Vernon McGee recounted a story of a certain man he knew when he was a pastor. He was always making requests and asking favors. The minute Dr. McGee knew that the man was on the phone, he knew he wanted something. The man always began his conversations the same way: "Oh Dr. McGee, I was listening to you on the radio this past week and I want to tell you I never heard a message like that." Dr. McGee explained, that the more flattering his words, the bigger the favor he was going to ask. Dr. McGee's final comment on the subject was, "Flattery is a dangerous thing because sometimes people believe it."

This proverb compares the righteous to the wicked by way of two contrastive couplets in verses 6 and 7:

“Evildoers are snared by their own sin,
but the righteous shout for joy and are glad.” (verse 6)
The righteous care about justice for the poor,
but the wicked have no such concern.” (verse 7)

The cause of the poor is something the righteous man considers and acts upon. The wicked man, on the other hand, pretends he doesn’t even see it.

Verse 8-11 tells us about the negative effects of the mocker and the fool. When mocking is contagious, and fools rage and scoff, there is no peace.

Verse 10 touches upon the “bloodthirsty who hate a person of integrity and seek to kill the upright.” When I read this, I was reminded of the crowd that shouted “Crucify Him!” as they scorned our Lord Jesus Christ before He was crucified.

Although we have not discussed the importance of firm and consistent child-rearing, it is a recurrent theme throughout Proverbs and worth mentioning. Proverbs 29:15 says, “To discipline a child produces wisdom, but a mother is disgraced by an undisciplined child.”

Verse 18 informs us that adults need to pay attention to God’s instruction just as children need to pay attention to parental instruction. In the Bible we read, “Where there is no revelation, people cast off restraint; but blessed is the one who heeds wisdom’s instruction.” In other words, where there is ignorance or rejection of God, crime and sin run wild. Public morality depends on the knowledge of God, but it also depends on keeping God’s laws. In order for both nations and individuals to function well, people must know God’s ways and keep His rules. Having God’s Word means little if we are not obeying it.

I wanted to touch upon verse 23 which tell us, “Pride brings a person low, but the lowly in spirit gain honor.” Because God resists the proud (James 4:6 and 1 Peter 5:5), pride will bring a man low. Like Satan, the one who hoped to rise higher through his pride, will fall (Isaiah 14:13-15.)

And finally, verse 27 tells us, “The righteous detest the dishonest; the wicked detest the upright.” This verse serves as an apt summation of our Scriptures.

Righteousness and evil are mutually exclusive. One must follow one path or the other. This is what the Lord says: “Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls.” (Jeremiah 6:16)

Applications:

I continue to be impacted for my need to obey God. As I put myself in the sandals of Adam and Eve, I thought about man’s human nature. Let us not forget that Adam and Eve were initially perfect. God created them and placed them in a perfect place to live and thrive; and yet, as soon as they had the option to choose to do God’s will or to listen to Satan, they gravitated toward the forbidden experience. I am grateful God doesn’t demand perfection from believers; all of us fail from time to time. Fortunately, God’s grace abounds. Nevertheless, at least one indication that our faith is genuine is a sincere desire to obey. If you do not “delight” in pleasing God by obeying His Word, perhaps now is a good time for some soul searching.

Lesson number one for me in this message is to simply and humbly OBEY God. The privilege of hearing God’s Word comes with the responsibility to obey it. Our response should not come from a mandate, but our response should be: “Because I love you Lord, I will obey.”

The second lesson I received from the Scriptures we studied is that it is time to review my priorities and make sure that they are right. Is it time for you to do that as well? Take a few moments now to review your priorities – family, career, vocation, health, finances, possessions, friends, hunting for Christmas presents, spiritual development. As your eyes landed on each word, did your conscience react to anything? Did you mentally flinch or cringe? Compromise occurs when our behavior fails to reflect our priorities.

Honestly now, have you begun to tolerate a few compromises you once rejected? What will it take to get that cleared up? We need to pursue righteousness and make it a passion of our hearts.

We have studied the way of the wicked and the way of the righteous. We have seen that even people whose history and family upbringing are similar differ in the way they think and live. Somewhere along the line, those individuals made a decision to choose to live righteously or to follow the way of evil. We, too, are faced with that decision. I believe we need to be “on our game plan” so-to-speak each day, and in fact, each minute to stay strong against the evil influences that we encounter.

Just a few days ago when I was in the middle of wrapping up this presentation, I caught myself thinking derogatory and mocking thoughts about one of God's servants. After spending hours on developing a presentation about good and evil and being convinced to draw closer to God each day, I failed to be God's person with "right" thoughts and "right" words in a matter of seconds after I heard disparaging information about someone. I was convicted right then to change my evil ways. **I know I must be on my guard each day in order to consistently choose the path of righteousness.**

At least four times in the Book of Acts, Christianity is called *the Way*. Certainly, it is the way of the righteous, not the way of the ungodly. Although I feel that I am preaching to the choir, I feel the need to ask the next question. Which *way* are you following and are you consistent in your walk?

If you have not accepted Jesus as your Savior, or know of the great love He has for you, what better time is there to come to know Him personally? Or maybe times are so difficult for you right now that you may want to talk with someone because you need some encouragement. Please feel free to approach your group leader. Remember, that person cares about you!

What a great time of year this is for us to appreciate the gift that God has given us, and what He has planned for our future. As we celebrate the birth of Jesus, let's pause each day to consider the full impact of the greatest gift of all.

When I taught my preschoolers about God – what a concept that is for a little child to grasp – I was able to make the connection for them and I saw their eyes light up when I reminded them of the baby whose birth we celebrate each Christmas – the baby whose bed was a manger. At church, the preschoolers would always visit the manger scene that was complete with a "live" Mary and Joseph and their baby. That visual gave me a way to share the fact that the baby grew up and is the Jesus who wants to be with us forever. I wrapped up a little heart in a box for each of them and explained that His love is the best gift we will ever receive. I know they did not fully understand my words, but I believe I was planting seeds for those precious children to accept Jesus as their Savior one day. I pray that when they see a manger, they will think of the little box with the heart in it and that Jesus' love will resonate in their lives forever.

This study has certainly opened my eyes to our glorious God and the lessons He has for us about good and evil. And by the way, those mansions on the hill are still aglow in the morning sunlight but now, in my mind, they represent the future gift that God has in store for all those who know and love Him.

Please stand as we pray and after our prayer, please remain standing as we sing the “Doxology.”

Dear Heavenly Father,

We come to you grateful for all that you do in our lives. What a wonderful and mighty God you are and we worship you. Thank you for the Christmas season and especially for the opportunities you give us to reach out to family, friends, and acquaintances to tell them about your great love. Give us the confidence and the words to share the gospel with them.

Thank you for the greatest gift of all – Jesus our Savior who took away our sins by His sacrificial death on the cross. We worship you and thank you – our Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace.” We pray that the joy of knowing you will live in our hearts now and forever. We pray this in Jesus’ name. Amen