

## THE INSIDIOUS NATURE OF EVIL A Devotional Meditation from

Isaiah 5: 13-25; Amos 5:4-15; Matthew 21:33-46; Luke 11:34-36; John 1:1-5

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Evil is bad. That is, it is harmful and painful, it breaks things and ruins lives, it preys on the weak, and it makes a mockery of lofty ideals. Evil happens; it is adversity in life. Sometimes the Lord causes it – or, more accurately, lets us reap the evil fruits of our own folly and rebellion. That's an aspect of evil we should be able to understand, but what we may not understand is *wickedness*: evil done on purpose by those who desire to bring harm. The Lord has strong words about that –

Acquitting the wicked and condemning the righteous:  
both are an abomination to *ADONAI*.

Proverbs 17:15 TLV

Calling evil good and good evil is obviously wrong. How could anyone do such a thing? But before we condemn those habitually wicked and ignorant people who fall for, or, worse yet, perpetuate such twisted logic, maybe we should consider Isaiah's prophecy of judgment on Judah given at the time Israel's Northern Kingdom was about to be destroyed by the Assyrians. Isaiah 5 opens with a parable about a faithless bunch of people who have lived securely in a vineyard the Lord planted, but which had not produced the good fruit He expected. Yeshua spoke that same parable to illustrate the wickedness running through the remnant of Israel in His day (Matthew 21). Here's what Isaiah says next:

Therefore My people go into exile for their lack of knowledge; and their honorable men are famished, and their multitude is parched with thirst. Therefore Sheol has enlarged its throat and opened its mouth without measure; and Jerusalem's splendor, her multitude, her din of revelry and the jubilant within her, descend *into it*. So the *common* man will be humbled and the man of *importance* abased, the eyes of the proud also will be abased. But the LORD of hosts will be exalted in judgment, and the holy God will show Himself holy in righteousness. Then the lambs will graze as in their pasture, and strangers will eat in the waste places of the wealthy. Woe to those who drag iniquity with the cords of falsehood, and sin as if with cart ropes; who say, "Let Him make speed, let Him hasten His work, that we may see *it*; and let the purpose of the Holy One of Israel draw near and come to pass, that we may know *it*!" Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; who substitute darkness for light and light for darkness; who substitute bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter! Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes and clever in their own sight! Woe to those who are heroes in drinking wine and valiant men in mixing strong drink, who justify the wicked for a bribe, and take away the rights of the ones who are in the right! Therefore, as a tongue of fire consumes stubble and



Neuschwanstein Castle, Bavaria. Adolf Hitler, 1914, [via Wikimedia Commons](#).

dry grass collapses into the flame, so their root will become like rot and their blossom blow away as dust; for they have rejected the law [Torah] of the LORD of hosts and despised the word of the Holy One of Israel. On this account the anger of the LORD has burned against His people, and He has stretched out His hand against them and struck them down.

Isaiah 5:13-24 NASB1995

Those are strong words for a people who thought they were doing the right thing. Maybe they thought superficial compliance to the Lord was enough, and that there was no need to learn how He really intended them to live. Whatever they thought, it seems that the people of Judah took the same approach to the Creator as their cousins in Israel. Listen to what Amos, a contemporary of Isaiah, said to them:

For thus says the LORD to the house of Israel. . . **“Seek the LORD that you may live, or He will break forth like a fire, O house of Joseph, and it will consume with none to quench it for Bethel, for those who turn justice into wormwood and cast righteousness down to the earth.”** . . . For I know your transgressions are many and your sins are great, *you* who distress the righteous *and* accept bribes and turn aside the poor in the gate. Therefore at such a time the prudent person keeps silent, for it is an evil time. Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and thus may the LORD God of hosts be with you, just as you have said! Hate evil, love good, and establish justice in the gate! Perhaps the LORD God of hosts may be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.

Amos 5:4-15 NASB1995 (emphasis added)

These passages should be disturbing – not because they describe people who were obviously wicked by the common understanding, but because God called them wicked and evil when they acted (at least outwardly) like righteous people. Both kingdoms of Israel called on the Name of the Lord and rightly considered themselves part of His Covenant people, but their attitudes and actions revealed hearts far from the Covenant. Evil to them was a word to describe their pagan neighbors. They didn’t seem to realize that evil had taken root inside them, expanding insidiously until its rot made God’s nation odious in His sight.

We have our modern equivalent of calling evil good and good evil. C.S. Lewis explains the modern manifestation of evil in *The Screwtape Letters*:

We must picture Hell as a state where everyone is perpetually concerned about his own dignity and advancement, where everyone has a grievance, and where everyone lives the deadly serious passions of envy, self-importance, and resentment. . . . The greatest evil is not now done in those sordid “dens of crime” that Dickens loved to paint. It is not done even in concentration camps and labour camps. In those we see its final result. But it is conceived and ordered (moved, seconded, carried, and minuted) in clean, carpeted, warmed, and well-lighted offices, by quiet men with white collars and cut fingernails and smooth-shaven cheeks who do not need to raise their voice. Hence, naturally enough, my symbol for Hell is something like the bureaucracy of a police state or the offices of a thoroughly nasty business concern.

C.S. Lewis, Preface to *The Screwtape Letters*, Revised Edition

From what Lewis says, it seems that evil hides behind the well-polished, polite, cultured veneer of civilization. That explains why John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Messiah, was an outcast from the polite society of first century Judea, while the corrupt Caiaphas rose to the office of High Priest. It goes with the deceptive nature of evil, and the straightforward nature of righteousness, which cares little for elaborate facades masking rotten hearts.

Evil can mimic righteousness, but can never understand it. Evil emphasizes appearance, but righteousness seeks to be genuine. This is evident in the lives of two 20<sup>th</sup> century Europeans. Adolf Hitler was an artist. Had things gone somewhat differently, he might have enjoyed a career as a painter in his native Austria, and his tortured soul would have manifested primarily in his artwork. But things did go differently, and Hitler's armies occupied much of Europe.

When the socially acceptable people of Holland decided to go along to get along with their Nazi conquerors, a humble, righteous watchmaker stood in line to get a yellow star of David in solidarity with his Jewish neighbors. Caspar Ten Boom knew his choice was perilous, and it cost his family dearly, starting with his own death in prison. Yet he could discern between righteousness and evil, thanks to a lifetime of prayer, Bible study, and interaction with fellow saints of God.

John the Apostle contrasts righteousness and evil in terms of light and dark, saying:

The Light shines on in the darkness, and the darkness did not understand it *or* overpower it *or* appropriate it *or* absorb it [and is unreceptive to it].

John 1:5 AMP

With this in mind, we should consider more seriously the exhortation of our Messiah:

Your eye is the lamp of your body. When your eye is healthy, your whole body is full of light. But when it is sick, your body is full of darkness. Therefore, watch out that the light in you is not darkness. If then your body is full of light, with no part of it dark, it will be as full of light as when a lamp gives you light with its gleam.

Luke 11:34-36 TLV