

SUBJECTIVE WICKEDNESS

A Devotional Meditation on Re'eh (See)

Deuteronomy 11:26-16:17; Isaiah 54:11-55:5;
Matthew 24:9-14; Luke 6:32-36; 2 Timothy 3:1-5

Albert J. McCarn

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How many genuinely wicked people do we know? Maybe more than we think, depending on how we define wicked.

These days wicked could mean anything from morally reprehensible to mildly out of bounds. It might even mean something desirable, but in a morally questionable way. Consider, for example, a sexually explicit dance. Some who call it wicked think it is bad because it is vulgar. Others might call it wicked as praise for a masterful performance. It's unclear, however, whether they appreciate the dance for its artistry, or are simply aroused by its erotic nature.



Photo by Tim Mossholder, San Luis Obispo, California, January 22, 2020, [on Unsplash](#).

This is only a problem for people with a moral compass. That, too, however, can be subjective, depending on a person's standard of morality. The appropriate height of a skirt or a neckline, for instance, can vary by culture, or even by one's stage of life. Young people might prefer more "sexy" attire, but that preference changes years later when they are concerned for their own daughters and sons.

It would help if we had a single standard to guide us in our daily choices. Then again, we do. Our Creator proclaimed his standards in the books of Moses, which we call the Torah, or the Law of God. As he was presenting these standards to Israel, Moses declared,

See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the LORD your God, which I command you today, and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the LORD your God, but turn aside from the way that I am commanding you today, to go after other gods that you have not known.

Deuteronomy 11:26-28 ESV

The plain sense of this is that good things follow when we adhere to God's standards of behavior, and bad consequences happen when we don't. However, there's much more to it than that. The Torah does include lists of correct and incorrect actions, but it's not designed to be a checklist learned by rote and followed to the letter. The Torah is actually an instruction manual intended to promote critical thinking that enables God's people to weigh each situation according to his principles. Often that means making difficult decisions that could be the choice between the lesser of two evils. Only a morally mature person with a healthy connection to our Creator can negotiate those difficult choices in ways that might involve hard things, such as executing a hardened criminal, or navigating

a divorce. We can't avoid those hard decisions, which is why we must have a connection to our Creator to ensure even the most difficult choices still point toward life rather than death.

The tendency, though, is to disregard God's standard, or to make exceptions and qualifications. That can happen either through our own ignorance of God's principles, or our unwillingness to apply them. Even God's covenant nation of Israel was susceptible to this tendency. That's why Moses went on to say,

You shall not do according to all that we are doing here today, everyone doing whatever is right in his own eyes, for you have not as yet come to the rest and to the inheritance that the LORD your God is giving you.

Deuteronomy 12:8-9 ESV

When everyone does what is right in his or her own eyes, the community drifts over time into ever greater degrees of lawlessness. The definition of wickedness becomes subjective. One person may say, "I'm not wicked because I don't steal," while another says, "I'm not wicked because I only steal to feed my family," or "I only steal from those who can afford it and won't miss it." This kind of reasoning can justify even the most reprehensible acts, especially when those acts are committed against someone else's family, race, class, or crime syndicate.

Eventually, this tendency will bring humanity to a point of global lawlessness, as Paul explains:

But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people.

2 Timothy 3:1-5 ESV

Paul is describing the fruits of wickedness. Notice that the wicked people he describes still consider themselves good, moral, and godly. The problem is that their frame of reference has changed. Instead of learning and living by God's standards, they take what seems right, but is actually the way of death.

Messiah Yeshua explained this situation as a time when lawlessness increases and the love of many grows cold. In contrast, God's true witnesses will be known by their genuine love. As Yeshua says:

If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to get back the same amount. But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.

Luke 6:32-36 ESV

That kind of love is unconditional, but it's not uninformed. It comes from a lifetime commitment to connect with our God, learn the ways of his Kingdom, and navigate the hard decisions with his standards as our guide. When we do that, we not only receive God's blessing, but we become his blessing to a dark and heartless world.