

Are Humans Good Or Evil?

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“They have all turned aside; they have together become unprofitable; there is none who does good, no, not one.” —Romans 3:12

English writer G.K. Chesterton, known for his wit as well as his insight, once wrote, “The word ‘good’ has many meanings. For example, if a man were to shoot his grandmother at a range of five hundred yards, I should call him a good shot, but not necessarily a good man.”

His words strike at the heart of a question theologians, philosophers, artists, and many others have debated for millennia: Are people good or evil? Is man’s nature on the side of the angels or the demons? Are we beings of light or darkness? Why do otherwise good people do evil things?

People are split on the subject. A few years ago, Debate.org, a website devoted to arguing such questions and polling the public on them, asked, “Is human nature good or evil?” Their results, which are not scientific, show 49% of respondents answering that it is good and 51% saying that it is evil.

Some Christian churches teach a doctrine of total depravity. *Theopedia* defines this doctrine in this way: “. . . as a consequence of the Fall of man, every person born into the world is morally corrupt, enslaved to sin and is, apart from the grace of God, utterly unable to choose to follow God or choose to turn to Christ in faith for salvation.”

This belief does not mean that humankind is utterly evil, that is, that people are totally incapable of good. It means that, while not all of human nature is depraved, all human nature is totally *affected* by depravity. Even the goodness that we do, then, is tainted by our sinful nature. This agrees with God’s description of the tree from which Adam and Eve partook in Genesis 3: It was a tree that allowed them to know good and evil (Genesis 2:17; 3:22). Human goodness is insufficient to satisfy the righteous requirements of God.

It is somewhat surprising that more people, especially Christians, do not know the basic nature of mankind. It should be evident from the lives of men and women throughout history. For Christians, who should know their Bibles, a cursory survey of Scripture brings out many plain statements that show what God thinks of human nature. No philosophizing or critical thinking, even by the greatest of human minds, will change God’s view into something else.

God Sets the Record Straight

In Genesis 6:5, God describes the state of humankind in stark terms: “Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” His response was to send the Flood to wipe mankind almost completely from the planet. He would start again with Noah’s family, his sons and their wives.

Immediately after the waters receded and the ark was emptied, Noah makes a sacrifice to God for their deliverance. “And the Lord smelled a soothing aroma. Then the Lord said in His heart, ‘I will never again curse the ground for man’s sake, although the imagination of man’s heart is evil from his

youth” (Genesis 8:21). Did the Flood change anything? Millions of people died, billions of animals died, uncouped trees and other plants died. But the human heart did not change; it remains “evil from his youth.”

It did not change after God gave His people the covenant and His commandments. While they were still in the wilderness, He commanded them to wear tassels with a blue thread on their garments. The tassels were to hang down below any other garment so they would always be in sight. Why did He require this? He explains in Numbers 15:39:

And you shall have the tassel, that you may look upon it and remember all the commandments of the Lord and do them, and that you may not follow the harlotry to which your own heart and your own eyes are inclined.

“Harlotry” here is a metaphor for idolatry. Their hearts and their eyes were inclined to worship something other than God, just as every other human being has tended to do.

The Psalms contain direct and unambiguous statements on what man’s nature is really like. The first one, from Psalm 14:1-3, Paul quotes in Romans 3:10-12:

The fool has said in his heart, “There is no God.” They are corrupt, they have done abominable works, there is none who does good. The Lord looks down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there are any who understand, who seek God. They have all turned aside, they have together become corrupt; there is none who does good, no, not one.

We are all corrupt. No one—“not one”—is good. The only thing that saves us is the blood of Christ. So Paul, in Romans 3:23, concludes: “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” This is just another way of saying that man’s nature is “only evil continually.”

The second statement from Psalms, which appears in David’s prayer of repentance, is an interesting one: “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me” (Psalm 51:5). Those who believe in original sin believe that David is saying that he was born a sinful person. However, that is a misinterpretation.

The truth is a bit simpler. He means that he was born into a sinful world, and even his mother, whom he probably loved more than anyone else other than God, was a sinner. Put in other words, his mother was a sinner when he was conceived, and when he was born, the world was full of sin. Sin and sinful people had surrounded him his whole life. A baby is born a fairly blank slate, certainly having done no sin, but the influence of sinners along with his fleshly nature invariably get the better of him, and before long, he sins. In his way, David is telling God, “With all the sin around me, it’s not surprising that I sinned too.”

In the next verse, he declares that God “desires truth in the inward parts” (Psalm 51:6). In other words, He wants people to change their natures, which only He can help us to do, as the last half of the verse explains: “And in the hidden part You will make me to know wisdom.” David is essentially repeating what God said in Genesis 8:21, “. . . man’s heart is evil from his youth.” But he wanted his nature changed from evil to good, from dirty to clean, from lies to truth. Only repentance and a renewed relationship with God would enable that to occur. And, truth be told, it will never be completely changed until the resurrection from the dead.

More Old Testament Assertions

Other Old Testament wisdom and prophecy books concur with the earlier statements about human nature. In fact, the entire Bible speaks with a single voice on the matter. It is impossible to brush aside the reality of sin and the tendency of all people toward selfishness and self-interest.

Proverbs 14:12—“There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death”—may at first not seem to be relevant. Solomon is telling us that even the deeds we think are right are sinful, for if they were not sinful, they would not end in death. Death is the result of sin (Romans 6:23). So even the “good” things that we do without God are ultimately sinful because they arise from a corrupted nature.

In Ecclesiastes, Solomon makes another statement to back this up: “For there is not a just man on earth who does good and does not sin” (Ecclesiastes 7:20). Notice that he is speaking of “a just man,” not an evil man or a corrupt man. The best citizens among us, those we raise to judgeships and listen to in church, have their own sins, and even in their doing of good, they cannot keep out the taint of sin.

The Preacher doubles down in Ecclesiastes 9:3: “This is an evil in all that is done under the sun: that one thing happens to all. Truly the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil; madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead.” People’s entire lives are full of sin, evil, madness—and then they die. Not even good and just men, as others think of them, are truly good and just. Like all the other “sons of men,” their hearts are full of sin.

Isaiah 1:4-6 describes Israel at its most corrupt, but it is typical of all mankind:

Alas, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a brood of evildoers, children who are corrupters! They have forsaken the Lord, they have provoked to anger the Holy One of Israel, they have turned away backward. Why should you be stricken again? You will revolt more and more. The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faints. From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it, but wounds and bruises and putrefying sores. . . .

God describes Israel as totally cancerous with sin—and Israel had His revelation! If the Israelites, to whom God had revealed Himself (Amos 3:2), were this corrupt, how sinful is the rest of the world *without* God’s revelation?

Of course, we cannot exclude Jeremiah 17:9: “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?” Our hearts are unfathomably corrupt and deceptive. Trying to feel good about ourselves, we lie to ourselves about how selfish and self-serving we are. So God asks, “Who can know it?” We do not recognize the depths of our own sinfulness.

Proof from the New Testament

In Matthew 7:11, Jesus does not mince words: “If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!” He calls the people in His audience—His own disciples (Matthew 5:1)—“evil.” It cannot be any plainer—and from the mouth of our Savior!

Mark 7:20-23 appears in a passage that many think He spoke only to dispose of the law against eating unclean meats, another misinterpretation. He was making a far larger point concerning the nature of humanity:

What comes out of a man, that defiles a man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within and defile a man.

So, in the Judgment, we cannot say, “The Devil made me do it” or “The world was so corrupt, I didn’t have a chance.” Despite outside influences, each of us makes the choice to sin or not. Our choices reveal what is in our hearts, and too often we choose these wicked activities and others beside. We cannot foist the blame onto others because our sins come from within.

The apostle Paul explains the state of individuals before conversion in Ephesians 2:1-3:

And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others.

We were always influenced by Satan, the prince of the power of the air. We all walked according to the sinful course of the world. We all fulfilled our lusts. All of us were children of wrath, that is, we were under judgment because of sin. Our nature is corrupt to the core.

Finally, Peter writes: “For we have spent enough of our past lifetime in doing the will of the Gentiles—when we walked in licentiousness, lusts, drunkenness, revelries, drinking parties, and abominable idolatries” (I Peter 4:3). He could have named a hundred more sins, but the point remains: We were all like the unconverted people in the world. We were all cut off from God and living in sin, just like all the rest of humanity from the time of Adam and Eve. There have been no exceptions apart from Jesus Christ.

What Can Be Done?

It seems overwhelmingly clear that human nature, fashioned by the influence of Satan, this world, and our innate selfishness, is not good but evil. God lets us know many times and from many different angles that this is the reality of humanity. We are sinful creatures.

What can we do about this state of human nature? How should we conduct ourselves, knowing that we, though God has called us, still have this nature within us? Paul gives us some advice in Titus 3:1-7:

Remind [the brethren] to be subject to rulers and authorities, to obey, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to be peaceable, gentle, showing all humility to all men. For we ourselves were also once foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another. But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us,

through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, that having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

By the grace of God, we have been given a rare and wonderful opportunity to rise above the rest of humanity. We are now heirs of God, possessors of the hope of eternal life and of the knowledge of God's purpose. We are, as Jesus said, to be lights shining in the darkness of this evil age. So, Paul says, it is our responsibility as God's children in this world to fight the evil human nature within us and instead to display the nature of God in all of our actions—toward the world and toward one another—as we prepare for our ultimate work in His Kingdom.