"Good or evil—you cannot build your life apart from this distinction."
—Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

03-Sep-10

Evil Is Real (Part Two)

It is amazing to realize how blunt God is in His Word; as the saying goes, He is not afraid to call a spade a spade. He did not go to college to get a degree in public relations, nor does He believe in spin. He never sugarcoats the truth in fear of causing someone's feelings to be hurt because He knows that, if something truly needs to be said, it is worth saying truthfully. As Numbers 23:19 affirms, "God is not a man, that He should lie"—even a "little white lie" that to which many people often resort to spare another a bit of emotional distress.

In terms of evil, God does not spare anyone. We normally use the King James Version (KJV) of the Bible to determine how many times a certain word is used in Scripture. It renders various Hebrew and Greek words into "evil" and its forms 639 times. God's Word speaks about evil a great deal! Obviously, it is a major subject in His Book.

However, that is not the end of the matter. The foregoing tally was only for the word "evil," but we know that other words mean the same thing. Take "wicked," for example, with its variants such as "wickedness," "wickedly," and so forth. They appear an additional 494 times in the KJV. Now we are

approaching 1,100 words in the Bible that concern evil. We can also add the words "cursed" and "accursed," which are found 94 times. Our count is nearing 1,200 biblical occurrences on the subject of evil. Notice that we did not include any of the occurrences of such words as "sin," "iniquity," "trespass," "transgression," and the like. Plus, we failed to consider words that describe specific sins like "hate," "covet," "steal," "kill," "lust," "lie," etc.

God's Word mentions evil quite a bit, so it is not something that we should shrug off like a minor nuisance. If God treats evil as very real and present with us, then we need to take notice.

The Old Testament primarily uses one word for "evil," the Hebrew word *ra'* (*Strong's* #7451, closely associated with *ra'a'*, #7489), which, according to *Vine's Dictionary of Old Testament Words*, means "bad; evil; wicked; sore [severe]." *Ra'* connotes the opposite of "good" in thoughts, words, or deeds (see Deuteronomy 30:15; Micah 3:2). Further, what is *ra'* is wrong in regard to God's intent, as well as its effect on men. Something that is *ra'*, then, is a thing that God considers to be evil, and when it touches people—or people commit it—evil results. For example, Jeremiah 24:2 speaks of "bad figs," rotten and noisome, which ultimately stand for bad people and the evil acts they commit.

This word often describes, not just evil deeds, but also inner attitudes, that is, what we think and feel inside—in our hearts—toward God and other men. Some of the kings of Israel and Judah "did evil in the sight of the LORD." It was their inner attitudes of pride, lust, revenge, and other evils that manifested in acts of rebellion against God during their reigns. Biblical history is full of their idolatries, child sacrifice, wars, adulteries, and other evils. Their inner attitudes—evils—toward God or man brought disaster and dishonor upon themselves, others, and their nations.In addition, *ra'* can also describe moral deficiencies—a lack of good character traits—that harm the self or others. Clearly, it is a very broad term, covering anything that is bad or ends badly.

The New Testament uses two main words for "evil": *kakos* and *poneros*. *Kakos* (*Strong's* #2556) covers things that are bad, base, or wicked in character, making it the Greek equivalent of *ra'*. *Poneros* (*Strong's* #4190) describes things that are evil in their *influence* or *affect*. Thus, *kakos* is the

general word for "bad," "evil," or "wicked," but *poneros* concentrates on how evil works.

To put it simply, *poneros* denotes evil that causes labor, pain, sorrow, and further evil. In the end, it essentially means "active rebellion"—and in the Bible, that equates to rebellion against God! It is a more heinous form of evil than what *kakos* implies. In *poneros* we see evil in action.

A phrase in the Greek Bible, *ho poneros*, helps to bolster this idea of active evil. *Ho* is an article, equivalent to English "the." Therefore, *ho poneros* means "the wicked [one]." We have no trouble identifying who "the wicked one" is: Satan the Devil. This connection should give us a good idea of the extent and activity of the evil covered by *poneros*—the kind of evil Satan does.

Perhaps a better definition of *kakos*, rather than the general "bad," is "ungodliness" or "sinfulness." Notice the apostle Paul's use of *kakos* in Romans 7:19-21, where it is twice translated as "evil": "For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice. Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good."

Realize that Paul is writing this to church members in Rome sometime in the mid-AD 50s, and this war between his desire to do good and the evil that he finds himself practicing is *still* taking place within him. How long had he been a converted son of God by this time? Historians place the calling of the apostle on the road to Damascus in the early mid-30s, perhaps as early as AD 33-34. Thus, by this time, he had likely been converted for about twenty years—and he was still intensely and uncomfortably aware of the struggle against the "law of sin" occurring in him. This battle was being fought internally, he says in verse 18, in his flesh, and in verse 23, in his members.

He is telling us, "I don't want to do evil! It is my will not to do it, but too often I find myself caving in to it." In his mind, he knew he should not do these things, but he would do it anyway because of the evil that remained in his flesh. Even after a long period of conversion, there is an evil "law," as Paul calls it—we could also call it a principle, an attitude, a mindset, a tendency, an inclination—that is still present within us. It is almost like our

worse nature (as opposed to our "better nature")—a kind of "devil on your shoulder." Worse still, it is *in* us!

Earlier, in Romans 7:14, Paul had given another insight into this evil in us: "For we know that [God's] law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin." He is again speaking of this tendency toward evil because of the flesh that clothes us, which he names "carnality." Our carnality is what sells us into slavery to sin. One of the great responsibilities that falls to us upon our redemption through the liberating blood of Jesus Christ is to cease being slaves of sin and, instead, become slaves of righteousness (see Romans 6:15-23).

However, it is a terrible struggle—an all-out war—because, with our minds, we have already thrown off the shackles of sin, but our bodies, still receiving orders from the human nature that remains with us, are always trying to return us to those shackles. The battle goes back and forth—sometimes our spiritual mind triumphs, and other times, we let our flesh prevail. Unfortunately, this conflict will rage until we die, but we can thank God that He covers these frequent—yet, we hope, diminishing—lapses. We will look into this more thoroughly next time.

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

The Sin of Self-Deception
by John W. Ritenbaugh

In our relationship with God, we must emphasize principle over pragmatism, because pragmatism inevitably leads to idolatry. Jeroboam, in setting idolatrous shrines and festivals at Dan and Bethel, appealed to the carnal desire for practical convenience (I Kings 12:26-33). These practical compromises eventually led to the desecration of the Sabbath and the holy days, ending in the captivity of Israel. When doctrine is diluted, it turns into outright idolatry. Like ancient Israel, we have to guard against the tendency to gravitate toward ministers speaking smooth and pleasant things at the

expense of turning from the truth. If we are led into deception, it is because our carnal nature wanted it that way (Jeremiah 17:9).

From the Archives: Featured Article

What Sin Is
by John W. Ritenbaugh

Over the last half-century, sin has gone out of vogue. In the secular public's mind, it is a religious matter and not something of much consequence. But it matters a great deal to God because it is not only the cause of all the misery in the world but also the reason humanity is so far from Him. John Ritenbaugh explains the basics of sin and what God wants us to do about it.

If you would like to subscribe to the C.G.G. Weekly newsletter, please visit our Email Subscriptions page.