

Questioning Christianity

“If God is good why is there so much evil in the world?”

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

~ Delivered at Central Baptist Church on November 1, 2015 (Soli Deo Gloria)

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE)** Please open your Bibles to Matthew 13.
- In this series we are engaging eight of the most common questions people have about Christianity. Today the question is: ***“If God is good why is there so much evil in the world?”*** We are talking here about what is called “the problem of evil.”
 - The problem of evil is usually stated something like this: if God is good and all-powerful then evil cannot exist. But since we know that evil exists God is either not good (because He allows it) or He is not all-powerful (because he does not stop it.)
 - The conclusion is that the existence of evil is incompatible with the existence of a good and all-powerful God. Therefore, God does not exist.
 - This objection has tremendous intellectual power but it has even more emotional power because it is when we suffer that we struggle to believe in a good and all-powerful God.
- In my view, there is no better author who forces us to feel the intellectual *and* emotional weight of this argument more than Fyodor Dostoevsky in his famous novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*. In the story, Ivan Karamazov, confronts his younger Christian brother Alyosha with the weight of evil. Ivan says,
 - ***“People speak sometimes about the ‘animal’ cruelty of man, but that is terribly unjust and offensive to animals, no animal could ever be so cruel as a man.”***¹ Then he tells a story of a little girl whom her father and mother hated. Ivan says, ***“These parents subjected the poor five-year-old girl to every possible torture. They beat her, flogged her, kicked her, not knowing why themselves, until her whole body was nothing but bruises; finally...in the freezing cold, they locked her all night in the outhouse, because she wouldn’t ask to get up and go in the middle of the night...for that they smeared her face with her excrement and made her eat the excrement, and it was her mother, her mother who made her! And this mother could sleep while her poor little child was moaning all night in that vile place! Can you understand that a small creature, who cannot even comprehend what is being done to her, in a vile place, in the dark and the cold, beats herself on her strained little chest with her tiny fist and weeps with her anguished, gentle, meek tears for ‘dear God’ to protect her – can you understand such nonsense?”***²
 - Dostoevsky provokes our emotions and through Ivan forces us to ask how, in the face of such evil, we can believe in a good and all-

¹ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, (Everyman’s Library, 1990), Part II, Book 5, ch 4, 238.

² Ibid. pg 242.

powerful God. In light of school shootings, ISIS, and human trafficking, can we believe in a good and all-powerful God?

- In the parable of the wheat and the weeds, Jesus speaks into our intellectual and emotional struggles with this subject.
 - In this parable Jesus states three truths and offers one challenge.

GOOD AND EVIL EXIST

- The first truth we see is this: **(SHOW SLIDE)** good and evil exist.
 - Now this may seem like a rather self-evident truth hardly worth mentioning but, as we will see, it is actually quite profound.
- Jesus tells us a rather basic parable about good and evil. In verses 24-25 Jesus speaks of a good farmer who sows good seed but we also read of an evil enemy who sneaks in and sows weeds among his wheat.
 - This weed is a darnel plant, which was the annoyance of every farmer in the Middle East. It looks exactly like wheat. You cannot pull it up because it entangles its roots with the wheat making it impossible to weed selectively. What does all this mean?
- Jesus gives us the interpretation in 37-39. **READ 37-39a** – *He answered, “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed is the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil.*
 - So Jesus says that in this world good is a reality and evil is a reality. There is wheat and there is weed. But in verse 27 the harvesters ask a question. It is our question. **READ 27** - *Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?’* God, if you are so good, how is it that your world is filled with evil?
 - Look at verse 28. Jesus simply says that, *“An enemy has done this”* and then in verse 39 he identifies the enemy as *“the devil.”*
- This is not an ultimate answer because Jesus does not tell us why a good God allows the devil to exist in the first place. What the Bible does, however, is give framework to think through the problem of evil.
 - This framework begins with the basic fact that there is such thing as good and evil. Evil, the Bible says, does not originate in God for God is absolute goodness. Evil is attributed to the enemy of God who is called the devil.
 - It may not seem like it, but this is an extremely satisfying start to engaging the problem of evil. It is a satisfying start because it is miles ahead of other responses people have given.

THE FAILURE OF ATHEISM TO ACCOUNT FOR EVIL

- Let’s look at one of those responses. **(SHOW SLIDE)** The most common response to some great act of evil is to say it proves God does not exist. This is indeed a problem for the Christian but in this point I want to show you that it is actually a bigger problem for the non-believer.

- Smuggled into the entire discussion is the assumption that good and evil exist. But if there is no God, where do we get this idea that there is such thing as good and evil at all?
- Listen carefully: **(SHOW SLIDE)** If there is no God then nothing can be ultimately be called “evil” because evil can only be defined in contrast to an ultimate standard of good. If there is no God then there is no ultimate standard of good. If there is no ultimate standard of good then there is no such thing as evil.
 - Think of it this way: counterfeit money is only called “counterfeit” because there is such thing as real money. If there were no such thing as money it would be illogical to speak about counterfeit money. You can’t have a counterfeit without the real thing.
- In the same way the only way we can talk about evil is if we already believe there is an ultimate standard of goodness. But if there is no God then there is no ultimate standard of goodness and thus the very categories of good and evil become illogical.
 - The best atheists have recognized this. Richard Dawkins, today’s most famous atheist, writes, *“The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is at bottom no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but blind pitiless indifference.”*³
 - Here we see the horrors of atheism. Evil is not a problem in atheism because there is ultimately no such thing as evil. But are any of us really willing to say there is no such thing as evil?
- Thankfully almost no one, including atheists, actually live this out consistently. For instance, we all agree that selling a 7-year old girl into the sex trade is evil.
 - But why is it evil? Do we simply mean that it is evil because it goes against our personal preference? No, we believe it is evil regardless if a person prefers it or not.
 - Is the slavery and coercion of such a girl evil because our culture has said so? No, evil is not culturally defined; we believe abusing little girls is wrong in every culture from Thailand to Tanzania, Canada to Cambodia.
 - Perhaps, then, evil is something that has evolved over time so that our world today has come to a general consensus? Here, also, we cannot agree, for this means that good and evil are ever-changing concepts. If our moral intuitions are always evolving it could be that our present convictions on this issue are wrong and a future generation will see things differently.
 - But we cannot accept this. We believe it always has been, presently is, and always will be wrong to sexually abuse little girls. This standard transcends personal preference, cultural bias, and time itself.
- But don’t you see? If you say it is always evil in all places at all times to sexually abuse little girls then you are claiming there is an ultimate and timeless standard of good that exists. But if there is no God, where can you get such a standard?

³ Richard Dawkins, *Rivers Out Of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life*, 133.

- So you see it is actually the atheist who has a far bigger problem of evil than the Christian. The atheist wants to believe in good and evil and yet has no grounds to even believe they even exist.
 - So already Jesus' truth meets us intellectually and emotionally. He affirms what we believe and feel, namely, that good and evil are real. Jesus takes evil seriously by affirming its hideous reality. Good and evil exist.

GOOD AND EVIL WILL COEXIST

- Having established the reality of good and evil, Jesus adds a second truth in helping us to deal with this subject. The second truth we learn is that: **(SHOW SLIDE)** good and evil will coexist in this life.
 - Understanding this truth is what will spare you from a *naïve optimism* that thinks this world can be turned into utopia but it will also spare you from a *despairing pessimism* that thinks this world cannot be changed.
- Look at verse 24. Jesus says that he speaks this parable to tell us what “the kingdom of heaven” is like. Let’s talk about this idea of kingdom.
 - Throughout the Old Testament God had promised that in the future he would send a king who would set up his kingdom on the earth. This kingdom would wipe out all other evil kingdoms and usher in a glorious future age when there will be no evil, sickness, or death.
 - So you can imagine the hype when Jesus, steps onto the scene and says, *“The time has come...The kingdom of God is near.”*⁴
- Jesus is saying that in him that kingdom has come. The evidence is that wherever Jesus goes he destroys evil and its affects. Jesus casts out evil spirits, heals the sick, and raises the dead. But there was a huge problem. The people grew increasingly frustrated because Jesus did not kick out the Romans. Evil continued and then Jesus was crucified. What happened to the kingdom?
 - The question is even more forceful when the Bible teaches that Jesus rose from the dead conquering death and evil and now reigns at God’s right hand.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE)** If Jesus has conquered evil, why does evil still exist? If the kingdom is already here why do people fly airplanes into buildings and young men stand up in their school cafeteria and start shooting their classmates?
- In this parable Jesus gives us the answer. His answer is that **(SHOW SLIDE)** although the kingdom is already here it is not yet fully come. Jesus says that the future kingdom God promised has broken into the present but that there is a time of overlap between this present evil age and the perfect future age to come. During this time Jesus say God will allow the wheat and the weeds to grow together, a time when good and evil will coexist.
 - The present evil age and the perfect future age are like relay runners passing a baton. There is always a time when the two run alongside each

⁴ Mark 1:15.

other. In the same way the future kingdom has already come (that baton has been passed) but it is not yet fully here (the old age still runs beside it).

- Jesus says we live in the time of overlap when the kingdom is here but not yet fully here because the old age is still running alongside. This is what he says in verse 28. **READ 28b-30a** - *So the servants said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ But he said, ‘No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest.*
- **(SHOW SLIDE)** Understanding the “already but not yet” of the kingdom saves us from responding to evil with naïve optimism or despairing pessimism.
 - Some people seem to have this naïve optimism that the world is getting better and better. Jesus’ teaching shows us that we must not be naïve and think utopia will come through a political leader, through better education, or more knowledge into science.
 - Jesus decrees that the wheat and the weeds will coexist together until the end of time because the kingdom is not yet fully come.
 - Having said that this parable also saves us from a despairing pessimism that thinks we cannot do anything about injustice, war, broken marriages, or poverty. Since the kingdom has come in the risen and reigning Jesus change can happen.
 - This is why in the midst of great evil and despairing days we pray *“Your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven”* and then get up from prayer and work believing that Jesus reigns.

GOOD WILL ALWAYS EXIST BUT EVIL WILL CEASE TO EXIST

- So Jesus has taught us that good and evil exist and that good and evil will coexist in this life. Truth #3 is the final answer to the problem of evil and it is this:
(SHOW SLIDE) Good will always exist but evil will cease to exist.
 - Look at verse 30. **READ 30** – *Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, ‘Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.’*
 - Jesus then gives the interpretation half way through verse 39. **READ 39b-43** – *“The harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.*
- **(SHOW SLIDE)** Jesus says a day is coming when his kingdom will fully come. On that day he will rid this world of evil. We read in Rev 20 that the devil, that enemy who filled this world with evil, will be *“thrown into the lake of burning sulfur...[and] will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.”* We also read that *“death and Hades [will be] thrown into the lake of fire.”*

- And with evil gone God will come and dwell among his people. ***“He will wipe every tear from [our] eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”***
 - **(SHOW SLIDE)** So you see Christianity certainly does have a problem of evil but in the end Christianity has a solution for evil, namely, that God will utterly destroy it. The baton has been passed. Soon this present evil age will utterly fall away and the perfect age will race into the eternal future.
 - And we see that those in Jesus’ kingdom will experience eternal gladness in the presence of their good king, never again to be afflicted by evil.

HOW THE GREAT STORIES POINT TO JESUS

- We had just finished watching Disney’s movie *Frozen*, and my nine-year-old daughter was bursting with joy at another story that ended happily ever after. Still savouring the joy, we talked about why such stories resonate in our hearts.
 - They ignite a sense of hope that, no matter how dark the pages of our stories become, things will turn out in the end. But is such hope realistic or is it mere wishful thinking? When the movie ends and we walk back into the trials of real life, is there any reason to hope in a “happily ever after”?
 - The answer of Christianity is that because of what Jesus has done in conquering evil and Satan, there is a happily ever in the future.
- I said to Emily, ***“The reason why Frozen resonates so much with your heart is because it is a small version of God’s big story. Just as Arendelle was under a curse, our world is also under the curse of sin. Just as true love’s kiss was not enough of an act of true love to break the curse of winter in Arendelle, so also the curse of sin in our world cannot be broken simply by people trying harder to love each other. And just as the curse was broken when Anna sacrificially laid down her life for her sister, so also Jesus, in the greatest act of true love, sacrificed his life for us that the curse might be broken. For Anna’s act she was given back her life. So also, God raised Jesus from the dead and promises to one day bring us into a new world where everything is the way it’s supposed to be.”***
 - All the great stories contain echoes of God’s big story. There is a Prince who, like in *Sleeping Beauty*, has slain the dragon that holds us captive. There is a place where, like in *Peter Pan*, we will never grow old. There is a Hero, who like in all the superhero stories, will utterly vanquish evil. There is a Prince who, like in *Cinderella*, has taken us from rags to the riches of being his bride.
 - There is a day coming when, like Frodo in *The Lord of the Rings*, we will end our journey in the east and the ships will come to carry us home to the undying lands in the West, where white shores call and all turns to silver glass.

- Christians can enjoy these stories and, when they are done, say to each other, “Because of what God has done for us in Jesus, we will get all of this and far more.”
 - Christians believe that our longing for the world to be put right is not mere wishful thinking, or, worse, the naïve thoughts of children living in a fantasy world. We believe these longings are the ancient echoes of Eden within our souls – that through Jesus, God is working everything together toward a day when his kingdom will restore – even exceed – what was lost in this world so filled with evil.
 - When the kingdom fully comes, good will exist forever but evil will cease to exist in God’s universe.

ARE YOU WHEAT OR WEED?

- These three truths bring us then to one challenge. The challenge is **(SHOW SLIDE)** Are you wheat or weed? What kingdom are you in?
 - You will notice that we are not just speaking about evil in general terms. The wheat and weeds are people. Look at verse 38.
 - **READ 38** – *“The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one.”*
- The question then is what kingdom do you belong to? Only those in Jesus’ kingdom get the eternal future where there is no more evil.
 - You know you are part of Jesus’ kingdom if he is your king – if you gladly bow the knee to him, seek his royal pardon for your sins, and seek to love and serve him.
- **“But”** someone says, *“this is exactly why I don’t bow the knee. I just have a hard time trusting a God who allows such evil and suffering in the world.”*
 - I empathize with this objection because usually the person saying it is speaking out of a deep personal experience of pain. But listen, this is where Christianity is unique among all the world’s spiritual paths and religions.
 - The God of the Bible did not remain distant from our pain and suffering. To the contrary, Christianity teaches that God put on human flesh. God walked among us in the person of Jesus. He experienced firsthand the suffering and evil that we do. He was betrayed, rejected, lonely, bereaved, tortured, and ultimately murdered. Moreover, on the cross Jesus took upon himself all our evil that we might be forgiven and restored back to God.
 - So it all comes to this. When we ask why God allows such evil and suffering we do not get a full answer. But when we look at the cross we can be sure of one thing: it is not because he does not care about us.
- John Stott writes these powerful words:
 - *“It is the cross that gives God his credibility...In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it? In the course of my travels I have entered a number of Buddhist temples in different Asian countries. I have stood respectfully before a statue of the Buddha, his legs crossed, arms folded, eyes closed, the ghost of a smile playing*

around his mouth, serene and silent, a remote look on his face, detached from the agonies of the world. But each time, after a while, I have had to turn away. And in my imagination I have turned instead to that lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross, nails through hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs wrenched, brow bleeding from thorn pricks, mouth dry and intolerably thirsty, plunged in Godforsaken darkness. The crucified one is the God for me! He laid aside his immunity to pain. He entered our world of flesh and blood, tears and death. He suffered for us, dying in our place in order that we might be forgiven. Our sufferings become more manageable in light of his. There is still a question mark against human suffering, but over it we boldly stamp another mark, the cross, which symbolizes divine suffering.”⁵

- So the question is, *“Will you trust Him? Will you bow the knee put your hand over your mouth and say, ‘I do not understand but I will trust you and follow you?’”*
 - What side are you on? Are you wheat or weed? He who has ears to hear let him hear.

⁵ John Stott, *Why I am a Christian*, pg 63.