

Evil vs. Evil and the Fatherhood of God

by Ward Fenley

Over the course of twenty-plus years that I have been a Christian, I have spoken with hundreds of religious people, primarily under the banner of Christianity, about what Christianity actually is. These religious people, some of them zealous and some not so zealous, generally have a fairly similar perception of Christianity. Of course, many are very works-oriented in their view of salvation, but almost invariably, *most* professing Christians allow guilt to be the driving force of their religion. And almost invariably accompanying this spirit of guilt is also that spirit which tends to place an imbalance upon evil deeds. That is, these religious folks will usually view certain deeds as worse than certain other deeds. It is no secret that the vast majority of us who have grown up in religious environments have been taught in various ways that certain evils are worse than other evils. For example, evil deeds like murder and molestation are viewed as the most heinous of crimes, while next on the list might be bestiality and homosexuality, followed by adultery, and then lower on the list would be robbery, stealing, racketeering, extortion, pornography, fighting, lying, and then *smaller thinking* about the above might be last on the list. things like talking mean, gossiping, and then simply

Recently I had the privilege of spending some great time with a musician in a traveling rock and roll band. He is a Christian who, like so many of us, has had many struggles with guilt and the pain of poor choices. In our several conversations he communicated to me in the saddest and most self-deprecating way the agony of his spiritual experience as a result of the many vices which gripped him. Of course, as I listened to his list of many wanderings, I couldn't help but feel a sense of refreshing, not that I was exulting in his weaknesses, but rather that he had laid wide open the door to real humanity and revived the all but lost art of "confessing our faults one to another." Here was a man who had nothing to lose in his confession. He had no ministries of concern, no financial loss to incur, no reputation to tarnish; he was simply sharing with me those things which were driving him to despair. Through all his confessing he continually made reference to the cross with statements like, "How could I possibly have done all these things when my Savior would give Himself for me?" It was beautiful, yet sobering. For, accompanying every breath of "why" and "what have I done?" was the common perception that the things he had done were so much worse than the things other Christians had done, as if his evil deeds somehow weighed heavier in the balances than those of more upstanding Christians. And surely most of Christendom would agree. Yet then, somehow, the conversation turned to his daughter's best friend who had been murdered the previous month. The incident made national news. At first the conversation was linked to the age-old question, "Why would God allow that?" We proceeded to briefly discuss God and His mysterious sovereignty and control of all things. But then my friend began to wax intense about how awful this murderer was and how Christ could die for such a horrible deed. It struck me as contradictory that this man, not fifteen minutes earlier, had abased himself to such a low degree as to say, "How could Christ accept me for all the wickedness I have done?"; and yet immediately be in shock and awe over the brutality of this murderer.

My friend had done what all of us naturally do: he had elevated one *sin* over another. Now, it is important to understand that many times this is simply a case of

theological ignorance. We often go years unaware of certain truths and yet when those truths are presented, God in an obvious way makes those truths clear to us. For my friend, this was probably the case. As our discussion continued, he began to realize that from cover to cover, the Bible is filled with the story and study of God and man: theology and anthropology. The Bible is filled with many grotesque demonstrations of those things man is capable of doing. Those very stories were never meant for us to step back and say, "How terrible! How could someone be so callused?" Specifically, there are examples of the stoning of prophets, the sins of the Kings of Israel, and even one story of some men of Israel raping a woman and then her father cutting her up into twelve pieces and sending a piece to each of the twelve tribes of Israel. When a newflash reports the workings of a serial killer, we usually ask those questions which arise out of amazement. However, the examples in Scripture are just as gory as anything we might see on the news or even in a horror movie. In no way am I suggesting that we view such things as miniscule or trivial. Rather, what I am suggesting is that we not be amazed at such evil but instead understand that God put all such evil in Scripture in order to show what we all are capable of doing.

Those examples are in Scripture for this primary purpose: to let us know that from an inward thought of pride to the outward manifestation of murder, Jesus needed to pay the penalty for both sins, regardless of how *harmless* one sin may seem when compared to another. In other words, when we have a thought of pride or jealousy, we need to realize the gravity of that thought and know that it needed the penalty of the death of Jesus Christ just as much as any outward action of murder we might commit or have committed. Are we willing to admit that God demanded His Son bear the punishment for the sin of even the smallest inward thought? If so, then we cannot possibly separate any two sins as if one were more severe than the other. They both were so evil and so severe in contrast to the holiness of God that God demanded the slaughter of His only begotten Son. When we take on this perspective of evil, we suddenly lose our amazement at the sins of others, understanding that apart from the death of Christ, we would be equally as guilty as the most violent serial killer, child molester, or genocidal dictator. For even Paul says, "What then? Are we better than they? In no wise, for we have before proved both Jew and Gentile, that they are all under sin" (Romans 3:9).

My friend wondered how he could do the things he had done and yet marveled even more at how a person could be so violent as to kill his daughter's best friend. My encouragement to him was to not marvel at evil but marvel at how profound God's grace must be that He could forgive all of the evil any of us do and are capable of doing. And instead of waking up after a night of debauchery and the exercise of evil and wallowing in guilt and feeling wretched before God, that he would give thanks with a grateful heart and stand in awe of how far-reaching God's forgiveness must be for Him to view us as "holy and without blame in His sight"(Colossians 1:22).

As Christians we need to understand that God has given us the ministry of reconciliation. He has called us to let those who have trusted Christ, who inadvertently make separations between sins and wallow in shame and guilt, know that they are forgiven and that their "warfare is accomplished and their iniquity is pardoned"(Isaiah 40:2). This is the ministry of God's people: to remind one another of God's perspective of them and to "comfort them with the comfort wherewith we

are comforted by God" (2 Corinthians 1:4). We are called to tell every Christian "overtaken in a fault" that "we have the same lusts" and yet together we are reconciled to God because of the death of His only Son. God's people must appreciate the magnitude of even the seemingly tiniest of evil thoughts and realize that they were thoughts demanding the full justice of the wrath of God, while at the same time recognizing that the love of God overcame His wrath so much that "where sin abounded, grace abounded more." It is this message which comforts Christians and this very message which should make the world view Christians as the chief lovers of mankind and those given to forgiveness and reconciliation. It is this love which will warm the hearts of those, like my friend, who have been taught by religion that there is a difference between their sins and those of others.

In the last moments of the conversation I realized that what my friend needed was the analogy of fatherhood. I gave him the example of his daughter. I simply asked him what he would rather have if his daughter had walked away from him for years, being given to enmity and separation and coldness of heart. Would he rather her come groveling before him, begging to become his child again, and weeping in misery? Or would he rather have her come back holding him, thanking him and kissing him for his never-ending love and never-ending commitment to his fatherhood? Certainly, upon our first acknowledgement of our need for forgiveness, there is that initial response of sorrow to be immediately followed by thankfulness. But for the Christian, what should our response be hereafter? It should never be one of guilt or shame, for He has taken all that guilt and shame and removed it, having "cast it into the depths of the sea." I asked my friend to view God's Fatherhood as he would view his own fatherhood to his daughter. It was an eye-opening moment for him. He had never seen the analogy, neither was he taught that view of God in "church." It wasn't because I had special insight into my friend's heart. I merely revealed passages which speak of God's love toward us as His children. God's love for His children continues regardless of anything ranging from a stray thought to an atrocious act of violence. We need to recognize that God's forgiveness is that enormous and it needed to be that enormous for both sins. His Fatherhood continues even though He knows what we have done and what we will do. Upon realization of this we become thankful rather than feeling guilty. We become joyful rather than sorrowful. We delight the heart of God rather than grieve His heart. As parents our hearts would be grieved if we knew our own children worried that they had lost their status as our children and if we knew they were fearful that they wouldn't be loved by us. But we delight in knowing that our children fully trust and rest in our relentless love for them. It is no different for God the Father. The earthly analogy of parenthood was given to us for a reason: to understand how magnificent our Father's love is to us and how magnificent that same love should be from us to each other.