

Evil Looking Good

In the name of him who loved us and gave himself for us, dear friends in Christ: We live in an evil world. And so much of the evil we see is obvious. We see it in clear violations of God's commands: in murder, fighting, cursing, theft, character assassination, gossip, lies, sexual immorality, and so on. We see this evil in others, and, if we're paying attention at all, we see it in ourselves.

But not all evil is so obvious. Indeed some evil can appear quite good, which shouldn't surprise us. The Scripture says that Satan disguises himself as an angel of light to deceive the unwary. Consider: the initial fall into sin was not so much about disobeying God as it was about Adam and Eve trying to improve their spiritual standing. They aspired to be more like God. They believed Satan's lie that eating the forbidden fruit would help them achieve that goal – which in and of itself is a good goal. Being like God is a good thing. By his twisting and turning of God's Word, Satan made evil look good, so that our first parents imagined they were doing good by disobeying God's express command. I don't need to tell you that they were very wrong about that.

But this has been a huge part of mankind's problem ever since: not just the obvious evil that we do, but also our constant struggle to improve ourselves spiritually, or to come closer to God, or to become more righteous in his sight apart from or in addition to the Word of God. This is precisely the problem that's being addressed in two of today's lessons.

In the Gospel we've got the Pharisees criticizing Jesus because his disciples are observed eating with unwashed hands. And please understand, it's not that they are concerned about hygiene. The disciples' hands aren't dirty. No, the Pharisees are complaining that the disciples haven't performed a ritual washing of their hands. Now it's true that the Scriptures do prescribe ritual washings. They were mostly for the priests to prepare them for their duties while working in the temple. But the Pharisees reasoned that if ritual washings were good for the priests and for the work they do, such washings must be good for everything. And so they came up with a long list of items that needed to be ritually washed before they could be used. The thought was that by doing so, I am somehow holier or more acceptable to God because I performed these rituals on my hands, my plates, my cups, the pot I cook stew in, and the piece of furniture I lie on when eating it. The flip side is that those who neglect to perform these ritual washings are defiling themselves because they aren't doing things the "right" way.

Jesus explains that exactly the opposite is true. These added, made up, human rituals actually serve as ego boosting sources of sinful pride. They move a person's heart away from the Lord, not closer to him. They further cause those who adhere to them to cast false judgments on others – others they smugly look down upon from their artificial sense of superior holiness. These traditions may arise from good intentions. They may appear very impressive. But they are in fact evil masquerading as religious piety. They are evil looking good.

Jesus goes on to cite another tradition the Pharisees came up with that actually negates a command of God. The Fourth Commandment is to honor your father and mother. This includes obeying them when you're growing up under their authority, and also caring for them in their old age. The Pharisees – with supposed good intent – came up with a rule that said you could pledge your wealth to the Lord so that upon your death, it would be given to the temple

treasury. And because honoring the Lord and giving to him is more important than honoring your merely human parents, you were then excused from spending any of that money to support your parents in their dotage. The Pharisees reasoned that it would be like stealing from the Lord – a grave sin indeed. “So, sorry Mom, sorry Dad. Yes, I know that you’re cold and starving; but I’m doing this for the Lord.”

Jesus takes them to task. Your traditions make void the Word of God. If you love the Lord as you claim to do, keep *his* commands – the ones that *he* gave you. Take care of your parents. Show them the love and respect you owe them.

We hear the prophet Isaiah dealing with the same problem with the outwardly religious people of his day, people who draw near to the Lord with their mouths and honor him with their lips, but whose hearts are far from him. They were going through the motions of worship, trying to look good and holy and pious, but it was all mechanics. It was external show. There was no change of heart, no repentance, no faith and trust in the Lord.

The problem is this: the real commandments of God are hard to keep; impossible in fact, which is why we are in constant need of his forgiveness. The thing about manmade rules and traditions is that we *can* keep them. We design them to be keep-able. And if I can achieve righteousness before the Lord by washing my hands and going through lots of outward motions and by dedicating my wealth to the Lord (only after I die, of course; I need it for the time being), well then who needs his forgiveness? I’m good the way I am.

This is evil looking good. It is, as Isaiah says, things turned upside down. It’s the clay dictating to the potter, “I’m in charge, not you. I write the rules. I know better than you. You, O Lord, don’t understand.”

It was exactly this sort of thinking that gave rise to the monastic movement in the fourth century of the Christians era, and which continues yet today. The question was, “How can I lead a life that is truly pleasing to the Lord?” The correct answer is, “Love the Lord your God, and your neighbor as yourself. Serve in life’s vocations as a faithful husband, wife, parent, sibling, and friend. Serve your neighbor in your chosen vocation as butcher, baker, carpenter, plumber, or whatever. When you fail – and you will constantly – confess your sins and receive Christ’s blood purchased forgiveness through his Word and Sacraments. Stand in his righteousness, not your own.” That’s the correct answer.

But that isn’t what people were told. No, they said that to truly please the Lord you had to enter a religious order. You had to subject yourself to a rigorous discipline of fasting, praying, and self deprivation. You needed to take a vow of perpetual celibacy and poverty. You needed, in short, to find a righteousness of your own rather than the righteousness that God gives through faith in Christ. And mind you, it looked good. The Church extolled the people who did these things as perfect examples of holiness and piety. Meanwhile those who were doing what they were supposed to be doing: working, raising families, serving their neighbors, and trusting the Lord; they were looked down upon as second-class citizens of God’s kingdom (if they rated that high). It was – and it still is – things turned upside down. It’s evil looking good.

We have other examples of it in our time. We have what might be thought of as secular Pharisees who are ever writing new rules for us. According to these rules you are a good person if you refuse to use a straw or a Styrofoam cup when you visit a fast food restaurant. You are good if you recycle what you can of your garbage and compost the rest. You are good if you own and operate the right car: one about the size of a shoe box, that runs mostly on

electricity, and gets over 50 miles to the gallon. You are good if you never eat red meat, but only 100% organic, free range chickens; but you are even better if you go fully vegan and never consume or use any product that comes from an animal. Yes, you see, there is a pecking order even among the secular Pharisees. And you have the right to feel superior to anyone who doesn't live up to the standard that you've adopted for yourself.

Mind you, there's nothing wrong with being environmentally conscious or choosing to be a vegan. If that's what you want to do, go for it. The problem is thinking that by doing so, you make yourself more righteous in God's sight or more righteous than others.

Today's Epistle lesson presents us with yet another example of modern human traditions superseding the Word of God. In it we hear the Apostle Paul extolling God's design for marriage, and how it is a beautiful picture of the relationship of Christ and his bride, the Church. As such, wives are to submit themselves to their husbands as to the Lord. They are to recognize and honor the role of headship the Lord has assigned them. And husbands are to love and cherish their wives as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her. They are to lead, yes, but with a view toward doing what's best for those the Lord has entrusted to their care.

But today we're told (yes, even in the Church) that's all wrong. The headship of a husband is evil patriarchy, a vestige of the savage past that must be done away with once and for all. Paul was obviously a misogynist. And the Lord, well, he just got that one wrong. But we know better. We can fix it. Men are expected to be less manly. Women are expected to be less feminine. And they are taught (and sadly many believe) that the great power God has given them to conceive, bear, and nurture children is a curse to be avoided rather than a gift to embrace. And in the wake of our "fixing it" we've ended up with more unhappy couples, more broken homes, and more children caught in the crossfire of warring ex-spouses.

And it gets worse. The modern human attempt to blur the distinct roles that the Lord has assigned to men and to women has led to efforts to eliminate the distinction between male and female altogether. This is viewed as a good and noble goal. A month or so ago the ELCA (our more liberal sister church body) held their national youth convention. Two of the featured speakers were a mother and her son who, from an early age, showed signs of favoring more traditionally girlish things. When the boy attained the age of six, following their therapists' advice, the parents decided he was transgendered. They began calling him their daughter and treating him as such. He's nine now.

The mother came out on the stage and laid out the history. It was all very emotional, prepping the crowd of 15 thousand youth and their chaperones. Mom just wanted to support her child, no matter what choices he made. Oh, and she had two other sons; but had always wanted a daughter – and well, now she has one (sort of), so she's just tickled pink. (It made me wonder how that might have influenced the child's choices.) Anyway, with the audience all properly made sympathetic, they brought out the boy dressed as a girl. And to be fair, his youthful features could still pass as feminine. Obviously enjoying the vast amount of attention he was receiving, the child went on to explain that God doesn't make mistakes. No, he made me transgendered. And the clear implication was that the Lord had fully planned for him to "make the transition" when, about the time he hit puberty, he would have to begin taking hormones to arrest his development into a man and to help him grow into a more female figure. Presumably the surgery would come later.

What struck me was how the ostensibly Christian audience had fully embraced the false narrative. At each statement that denied the truth that he was in fact created by God a male child who would grow into a man if doctors didn't intervene and try to play God, the crowd applauded enthusiastically. They had found a new way to be righteous, namely to accept the new orthodoxy and agree that the child's disordered thinking was the truth. To disagree, to say that the child had a mental problem that denied his essential biology and he should be treated for it, *that* would be evil.

For my part I can only pity the child. Yes, he's enjoying the attention now. But if things continue the way they're going for him he'll be desperately unhappy in the future. No amount of hormones, no number of surgeries will ever make him into a real woman. It's simply not possible. And he'll come to realize that. He will become not a woman, but a mutilated man. And he'll come to hate that. The clay doesn't get to dictate what it is to the potter. The potter shapes the clay into what he wants it to be. Any other way is upside down. It's evil looking good.

And we are just as subject to becoming seduced by such good looking evil. Satan is an expert at what he does. And that's why we need to remain vigilant. It's why we need to remain steadfast in the Word as God gave it to us, so that with the help of his Holy Spirit we may discern the truth in all matters, never adding to or subtracting from God's holy Law; and finding our righteousness not in the outward performance of human rules and traditions however old or new they may be, but in Christ our crucified Savior, and in him alone. The Lord grant it to us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!