


ISAIAH 5:20-23

EVIL AS A “DUTY”¹

“Woe to those who call evil good
and good evil,
who put darkness for light
and light for darkness,
who put bitter for sweet
and sweet for bitter!
Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes,
and shrewd in their own sight!
Woe to those who are heroes at drinking wine,
and valiant men in mixing strong drink,
who acquit the guilty for a bribe,
and deprive the innocent of his right!”²

 Simone Weil, the French philosopher, displayed uncommon clarity in exposing human evil. Undoubtedly, the fact that she had witnessed firsthand the horrors that engulfed Europe during the rise of German National Socialism and Italian Fascism and the attendant horrors unleashed by these socialistic terrors enabled her to see clearly the consequences of mankind's evil. Weil was well acquainted with ordinary people's capacity for wickedness. She gave much thought to how such evil could be. One of her most startling conclusions was that, “Evil when we are in its power is not felt as evil but as a necessity, or even a duty.”³ Let that thought sink into your consciousness: “Evil when we are in its power is not felt as evil but as a necessity, or even a duty.”

Hers is a simple observation; but it is a significant observation. People engaged in terrible evil are often convinced they are doing what is right and good. This is especially revealing in contemporary debates over such stark moral issues as abortion, for example. Alex Sanger, Chair of the International Planned Parenthood Council is quoted as saying, “the battle for reproductive freedom won't be won until Americans are convinced that abortion is moral.”⁴

There is no question but that pro-abortion advocates truly believe they hold the moral high ground, or they would not persist in arguing as though they were morally superior. This lends understanding why, to advocates of death, pregnancy is an issue of women's health; and her ability to terminate a pregnancy trumps all other norms. “[P]regnancy is dangerous,” Sanger concluded. “It is not a walk in the park for any woman.”⁵ The current occupant of the American White House and his entire political party apparently have drunk deeply from the same polluted well from which Mr. Sanger imbibes; their views are amazingly similar to those of Mr. Sanger.

¹ The concept for this message arose from “The Blinding Power of Evil—or—Evil as a ‘Duty,’” Kairos Journal, <http://www.kairosjournal.org/Document.aspx?QuadrantID=4&CategoryID=8&TopicID=14&DocumentID=6471&L=1>, accessed 7 June, 2012

² Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers, 2001. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

³ Simone Weil, **Gravity and Grace** (Putnam, New York 1952) 121

⁴ Alex Sanger is the grandson of Margaret Sanger, founder of Planned Parenthood, then known as the National Birth Control League in 1916

⁵ Paul Swiech, “Advocate: Abortion Does Involve Morality,” The Pantagraph, September 20, 2005, A3

As a significant aside, do you not find it strange that there are people who will defend the rights of animals to live, even while arguing that women should be free to dispose of their own young? Imagine a world in which one-third of all great white sharks were killed for the personal comfort and convenience of those wishing to swim in waters frequented by these massive predators. Or, imagine a world in which one-third of all sea lions were killed to ensure that people could catch more salmon or steelhead trout. Of course, such actions would be protested vigorously. Yet, we live in a world in which one-third of succeeding generations are slaughtered in utero! However, the numbers of influential individuals who argue that mothers should be permitted to kill their children following live birth if they so choose is burgeoning! In spite of the obvious incongruity of their argument, those advocating the right to kill innocent children are prepared to argue that theirs is a moral position while those opposed to the slaughter of the unborn or the neonatal population is immoral! Talk about a topsy-turvy worldview!

Another area in which those who advocate unbiblical positions believe themselves to be morally right is witnessed in those individuals advocating for same-sex marriage. Advocates for social transformation through redefining marriage cloak their appeal in the language of virtue. One religious affairs writer in Great Britain hailed the Civil Partnership Act in Great Britain as “the introduction of a new morality into gay and lesbian society.”⁶ This particular individual felt the legislation would foster homosexual and lesbian relationships that “value loyalty and love above secret promiscuity,” a problem that he admits plagues homosexual society. Despite the fact that his relationship with his partner smacks of relativism, the author believes that they are practising a higher form of morality.

Positions such as these just described should not be surprising to thoughtful Christians. The very beginning of human sin demonstrates that the essence of being a sinner is rejection of the truth and being enslaved to a lie. To be a sinner is, in various ways, to “call evil good and good evil.” Wisdom’s saying that “all who hate me love death” [**PROVERBS 8:36**], underscores this theme and demonstrates the link between this inverted moral compass and idolatry.

To withdraw one’s affections from the Creator is to betroth oneself to evil and to turn the back upon that which one should know, by the light of nature and common grace, really to be true. The result of this choice to rebel is, to use the Apostle’s words, being compelled to live out one’s life with a “seared conscience.” It is not that abortion lobbyists or gay-rights activists are loveless and godless. On the contrary, they love much and believe much; but they love and worship wrong things—even terrible things. And this is a thought that should deeply grieve every disciple’s heart.

It is necessary for those bold souls who speak on behalf of traditional moral categories to understand this: those who oppose them do so on the basis of a perceived virtue. It is clarifying to realize what is really going on: those who stand in opposition to biblical morality are people enslaved to the darkness. Nevertheless, they believe, deep down, that they are the sons of light. Understanding this bizarre and deeply twisted view of life affects the Christian’s attitude to the so-called “culture wars.” Our “opponents” are not merely wrong; they are tragic people trapped in the zeitgeist of the age from which they desperately need to be freed. The challenge for God’s messengers today is to replace these idols of the heart with something better to believe and Someone better to worship

⁶ David Self, “Face to Faith: Civil Partnerships Will Lead to the Introduction of a New Morality into the Gay and Lesbian Community,” **The Guardian**, December 17, 2005, 35, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,,1669317,00.html> (accessed 24 July 2012)

GOD DETERMINES GOOD AND EVIL — Religious leaders who are prepared to warn against violating biblical morality are marginalised and dismissed by those shaping social thought. Were it not sufficiently wicked that society in general ignores these valiant spokesmen, the wickedness is made more horrendous still by the fact that often it is religious spokesmen leading the charge to deny sin as offensive to Holy God. Too many of those who profess themselves champions for the Lord God are more concerned with receiving public approval than they are with whether God approves of them. However, this truth must prevail—good and evil are defined by a perfect standard and not by the shifting opinion of a feckless society. The standard by which morality and ethics are determined is through comparison to that which God has established.

When initiating services for a congregation in the Lower Mainland, I advertised the sermon titles each week in a local paper. On one particular occasion, Sunday fell on April first. I placed an ad encouraging observance of National Atheist Day, citing the opening words of the Fourteenth Psalm: “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God’” [PSALM 14:1]. The ad generated considerable interest in the community, and a number of people phoned to complain about my lack of tolerance. Surprisingly, many of those complaining professed themselves Christian.

One caller in particular, though not claiming to be a Follower of the Way, took umbrage at the ad. She informed me that she was an atheist and that she was a good person.

“Who told you that you were a ‘good person,’” I asked?

“Well,” she offered, obviously taken aback by my query “my parents.”

“And who told your parents what is good,” I again inquired?

“I suppose their parents told them,” she responded. Almost immediately she interjected, “I know what you’re trying to do; but ‘good’ is determined by society. What society says is ‘good’ is good, and what society says is ‘bad’ is bad.” She spoke with an air of finality as though her argument was so superior no response could be given.

“Then you believe it was a good thing for Germany to actively seek out and kill Jews in 1939,” I queried?

“Well, no,” she stammered, clearly taken aback by this unexpected response. “That’s not a good thing. I’m Jewish.”

I pointed out to her that German society in the late thirties was in general agreement with ridding Europe of Jews. The general agreement to extirpate Jews spread throughout much of Europe until there was throughout much of European society a general intolerance against Jewish people. In fact, the prejudice was so great that not even Great Britain or the United States were eager to provide a refuge for the persecuted Jewish populations. There were plenty of reasons advanced why the English speaking peoples could not accept them, but the bottom line was dictated by a prejudice that had insinuated itself throughout society.

My interlocutor had failed to consider the possibility that society could be wrong because she was ignorant of the only perfect standard for determining right and wrong. I continued by pointing that it was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob Who gave mankind the perfect standard for what is moral. Moreover, I pointed out that when mankind rejects God’s moral and ethical standard, society will construct its own standard, and that standard which is constructed will be not only inferior to that which God gave, but it will prove detrimental to that society.

Establish in your mind that God who gives us our being has set the standard for good. God is Creator; and He who gives life is uniquely qualified to determine what is good. If man evolved, then the moral/ethical code has also evolved and is still evolving. If man was not created, then we are incapable of defining good and evil, because there can be no fixed standard—what we declare to be good today may well be evil tomorrow.

Because God is Creator, defining what is good and thus defining evil, He, alone is able to condemn what is wrong. We define sin by referring to what is written in the Word of God. James, the brother of our Lord, writes, “Whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin” [JAMES 4:17]. Again, John has written that “All wrongdoing is sin” [1 JOHN 5:17]. John also cautions mankind, “Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness” [1 JOHN 3:4]. The spokesman of God can only speak that which God has commanded—he cannot define sin; he can only warn against that which God has condemned. Whenever someone argues that they have no idea what God expects, the Christian can answer very simply through appeal to that which God spoke through the Prophet Micah.

“With what should I enter the LORD’s presence?
With what should I bow before the sovereign God?
Should I enter his presence with burnt offerings,
with year-old calves?
Will the LORD accept a thousand rams,
or ten thousand streams of olive oil?
Should I give him my firstborn child as payment for my rebellion,
my offspring—my own flesh and blood—for my sin?
He has told you, O man, what is good,
and what the LORD really wants from you:
He wants you to promote justice, to be faithful,
and to live obediently before your God.”

[MICAH 6:6-8 NET BIBLE]

God demands that we promote justice, that we be faithful and that we live obediently. Well, that seems simple enough. Of course, people hearing this often assume the position of lawyers seeking to interrogate God in order to expose the flaws inherent in His just demands. We want to redefine justice, ensuring that we receive justice for ourselves whether anyone else receives justice or not. The business of faithfulness is fine in theory, so long as it doesn’t inconvenience our busy lives. Many of our contemporaries are prepared to concede these first two points within the parameters of what they call “reason.” However, it is this final expectation that often proves to be a stumbling block. God expects that we will be obedient to His will.

To live obediently implies that we know what God demands and that we are prepared to do all that He commands. To be obedient to God certainly suggests that we are conversant with what He has commanded through His Word. Even people who are not conversant with His Word have no excuse. It is written, “The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse” [ROMANS 1:18-20].

The Wise Man wrote a beautiful statement of God’s work in man’s life when he wrote, “[God] has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man’s heart” [ECCLESIASTES 3:11]. There is a desire to know what God has done within the heart of every individual. Moreover, there is awareness, however repressed that awareness may be, that there is a God and that we know that we are responsible to please Him through obeying Him.

This becomes evident from this statement the Apostle included in his letter to Roman Christians. “All who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified. For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them” [ROMANS 2:12-15]

From the foregoing, we may be confident that God—not man—determines what is good; likewise, God determines what is evil. No man has the right to define either good or evil; rather, man may reflect what God has already revealed. Since the fall of our First Parents, mankind knows good and evil; however, defining good and evil lies solely within God’s purview. Thus, no parliament can define good and evil. No congress can redefine what is moral or ethical. All that an individual—or a culture—can do is echo God’s definition and either act in accordance with the divine revelation or act in rebellion against what the Lord God has said. We are assured that God has clearly defined evil through what is written in His Word. Take note that it is a mark of mercy that God also warns us of the consequences of evil. We are told, “The wages of sin is death.” Then, in mercy, God quickly assures all who will heed His warning that “The free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” [ROMANS 6:23].

MAN COMMENDS WICKEDNESS — Without referring to the Word of God, which serves as a lamp to the feet and a light to the path [see PSALM 119:105], mankind is blinded and incapable of recognising error. It is but an affirmation of that which the Apostle has written to the Corinthian Christians. “The god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” [2 CORINTHIANS 4:4]. Listen to the words of the text again.

“Woe to those who call evil good
and good evil,
who put darkness for light
and light for darkness,
who put bitter for sweet
and sweet for bitter!
Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes,
and shrewd in their own sight!
Woe to those who are heroes at drinking wine,
and valiant men in mixing strong drink,
who acquit the guilty for a bribe,
and deprive the innocent of his right!”

[ISAIAH 5:20-23]

Isaiah is condemning the best thoughts and the best efforts of Jewish civic leaders in his day. Though they were encouraged by and prompted to act by the religious leaders of the nation, they could only stumble in darkness. Though they imagined themselves to be ever so wise and ever so shrewd, before God they were renowned only for their prowess at drinking and for treachery. Frankly, Isaiah could have been describing modern day politicians.

Though he should strive ever so hard, man is incapable of commending what is good. Apart from the revelation of God, fallen man tends to invert truth, commending what is wicked. Looking out over Roman society—a culture at the apex of wealth and power—Paul censured all mankind. Listen to the apostolic summation of cultures and societies.

“None is righteous, no, not one;
no one understands;
no one seeks for God.
All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;
no one does good,
not even one.”
‘Their throat is an open grave;
they use their tongues to deceive.’
‘The venom of asps is under their lips.’
‘Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.’
‘Their feet are swift to shed blood;
in their paths are ruin and misery,
and the way of peace they have not known.’
‘There is no fear of God before their eyes.’”

[ROMANS 3:10-18]

Paul presents a dark compilation of biblical statements that are applicable to fallen man. The description of mankind is drawn primarily from the Psalms with at least one citation from the Proverbs included. Paul emphasised that before God, every mouth would be stopped and the whole world would be held accountable to God [see ROMANS 3:19]; there is no possibility that one can placate God’s wrath through her own effort. Ultimately, the Apostle could summarise mankind’s condition in theses dark words: “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” [ROMANS 3:23]. The whole of mankind is under condemnation before God.

Undoubtedly, the Apostle could have intensified his description through appeal to the Prophets! This pictures man at his best! Societies move inexorably toward self-destruction as they increasingly move away from righteousness and move toward embracing wickedness. As certainly as smoke rises from the fire, so man tends to embrace evil. What is worse, all the while he argues that he is acting morally and ethically. However, the morality he embraces is that which he has created out of the fertile imaginations of his own febrile mind.

What a dreadful condemnation is pronounced by Isaiah when he writes,

“Justice is far from us,
and righteousness does not overtake us;
we hope for light, and behold, darkness,
and for brightness, but we walk in gloom.
We grope for the wall like the blind;
we grope like those who have no eyes;
we stumble at noon as in the twilight,
among those in full vigor we are like dead men.”

[ISAIAH 59:9, 10]

Jeremiah also spoke of conditions in that day—conditions that readily describe our own day.

“An appalling and horrible thing
has happened in the land:
the prophets prophesy falsely,
and the priests rule at their direction;
my people love to have it so.”

[JEREMIAH 5:30, 31]

By the time Jeremiah wrote, shortly after Isaiah wrote, even God’s spokesmen, the prophets, were corrupted. They were so far removed from speaking the truth of God that He no longer accepted them. Their prophetic word had degenerated into mere form—ritual without content. It was not merely that they were propagating error, but the people were demanding that they do so; the people preferred a lie to the truth! The conditions in that day presaged conditions that will mark the final days of this present, dying age. The Apostle Paul has warned believers, “The time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths” [2 TIMOTHY 4:3, 4]. These words are an iteration of that which he had penned previously. “The Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared” [1 TIMOTHY 4:1, 2].

As society grows increasingly wicked, the absence of certainty from the pulpit permits it to be so. The situation was not so terribly different in Judah’s final days; listen to the censure written so long ago as Hosea lamented over the failure of God’s priests.

“Let no one contend,
and let none accuse,
for with you is my contention, O priest.
You shall stumble by day;
the prophet also shall stumble with you by night;
and I will destroy your mother.
My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge;
because you have rejected knowledge,
I reject you from being a priest to me.
And since you have forgotten the law of your God,
I also will forget your children.

“The more they increased,
the more they sinned against me;
I will change their glory into shame.
They feed on the sin of my people;
they are greedy for their iniquity.
And it shall be like people, like priest;
I will punish them for their ways
and repay them for their deeds.”

[HOSEA 4:4-9]

If we who bear the honorific “Pastor” fail to fulfil our responsibility to warn against sinning against the Lord God, then we assuredly fall under divine condemnation. Recall the warning that Ezekiel delivered to the watchmen. “The word of the LORD came to me: ‘Son of man, speak to your people and say to them, If I bring the sword upon a land, and the people of the land take a man from among them, and make him their watchman, and if he sees the sword coming upon the land and blows the trumpet and warns the people, then if anyone who hears the sound of the trumpet does not take warning, and the sword comes and takes him away, his blood shall be upon his own head. He heard the sound of the trumpet and did not take warning; his blood shall be upon himself. But if he had taken warning, he would have saved his life. But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet, so that the people are not warned, and the sword comes and takes any one of them, that person is taken away in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at the watchman’s hand.

“‘So you, son of man, I have made a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. If I say to the wicked, O wicked one, you shall surely die, and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from his way, that wicked person shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, that person shall die in his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul’” [EZEKIEL 33:1-9].

We live in terrible times. Evil increases exponentially in this day. Too many of the pulpits of the land are silent concerning the evils now in ascendancy within society.

We slaughter one in three infants before ever they see the light of day; then we wonder how our ageing population can pay for all the excess expenditures we demand of governments.

We promote violence as entertainment and condone the use of crude, degrading language in casual speech, we esteem the cutting remark and the sharp put-down; then we wonder why our youth show scant respect for one another, to say nothing of showing little respect for their elders.

We view pornography as a form of amusement and no longer consider degradation of one half the population in our own minds a serious matter; then we marvel that our wives and our daughters feel insecure and are compelled to organise noisy marches to “take back the night.” The marches do little to ensure safety and they certainly don’t take back any nights.

We no longer esteem as holy the vows made before God during the marriage ceremony; then we wonder why over half of all marriages end in divorce. We depreciate commitment from husbands and wives, tolerating cohabitation without commitment; then we profess ourselves mystified why children born into such homes are insecure.

We normalise perversion and wonder why society not only tolerates, but avidly embraces ever more degraded and degrading attitudes.

We justify cheating in the little things and wonder why our children don’t strive to excel.

We consider worship to be a private matter; then we bemoan the desecration of Christmas and Easter by politicians, the relegation of prayer to a brief moment in the church of our choice and the transformation of Sunday into a day devoted to the god of recreation.

It is high time that the pulpit again warned that “The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse” [ROMANS 1:18-20].

It is time that the pulpit again lovingly warned mankind in the words of the Apostle, “Though they know God’s righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them” [ROMANS 1:32].

The pulpit has failed to warn of the consequences of sin. It is time for us to remember that “The wages of sin is death” [ROMANS 6:23].

GOD OFFERS MERCY — One of the difficult aspects of preaching prophetically is the pronouncement of divine warnings. Candidly, I shrink from such confrontations. I’m actually sympathetic to the timid soul who hesitates to speak so pointedly. However, if one wishes to please God who appoints to the sacred desk, he has no choice save to speak as directed to speak. The stern message is ameliorated, however, by the opportunity to point sinners to God’s mercy.

Perhaps our generation has become so jaded that they are no longer moved by the dire warnings of Holy God. Surely the one mired in wickedness will respond to the grace and mercy of the Lord of life! Surely the forward will respond to the love of the Father. God warned Judah through Isaiah that He would destroy them.

“The anger of the LORD was kindled against his people,
and he stretched out his hand against them and struck them,
and the mountains quaked;
and their corpses were as refuse
in the midst of the streets.
For all this his anger has not turned away,
and his hand is stretched out still.

“He will raise a signal for nations far away,
and whistle for them from the ends of the earth;
and behold, quickly, speedily they come!
None is weary, none stumbles,
none slumbers or sleeps,
not a waistband is loose,
not a sandal strap broken;
their arrows are sharp,
all their bows bent,
their horses’ hoofs seem like flint,
and their wheels like the whirlwind.
Their roaring is like a lion,
like young lions they roar;
they growl and seize their prey;
they carry it off, and none can rescue.
They will growl over it on that day,
like the growling of the sea.
And if one looks to the land,
behold, darkness and distress;
and the light is darkened by its clouds.”

[ISAIAH 5:25-30]

The warning was an act of mercy. Just so, the Lord God still judges the nations.

“The wicked shall be turned into hell,
And all the nations that forget God.”

[PSALM 9:17 NKJV]

Moreover, it is a mark of mercy that He warns that the wicked face the certainty of judgement. Yet, it need not be. This is the message of mercy and grace that we bring to all who will receive it. God sent His Son that He might present His life as a sacrifice for sin. Jesus, the Son of God, took upon Himself the punishment we deserve. He presented His life as propitiation for sin. Therefore, we are taught in the Word, “For our sake [God] made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” [2 CORINTHIANS 5:21].

Several times in this message you have heard me cite the opening words of ROMANS 6:23: “The wages of sin is death.” I must stress for your benefit the promise God offers in that verse. The True and Living God promises, “The free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” [ROMANS 6:23b]. Our present condition is that we are under sentence of death; yet, God offers each individual life through His Son.

You see, Jesus died because of our sin. He took upon Himself the wickedness of each one of us; He took our punishment in Himself. If an individual is under divine sentence, it is because they have not accepted the gift of life offered in God’s Son. This is the reason we point to Jesus the Son of God as the means for each one to receive grace and mercy. For this reason, God has promised, “If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is my Master,’ believing in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you shall be set free. With the heart one believes resulting in a right standing with the Father, and with the mouth one confesses resulting in freedom.” God now offers freedom from fear, freedom from condemnation, freedom from judgement. The promise is iterated in the words of the Prophet Joel, “Everyone who calls on the Name of the Master shall be set free” [ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13 FREE TRANSLATION].

I am commanded to announce that the grace of God is extended to you, even at this time. The mercy of God is offered to so many as are willing to receive His gracious gift. I urge you, receive the gift of life in Christ the Lord. Do it today. Do it now. Amen.