

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

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What theologians refer to as “the problem of evil” results from the fact that if God is all-good, all-knowing, all-powerful, and the sole creator of the universe, how do we explain the existence of evil? This creates what logicians call inconsistency. We can resolve the inconsistency by removing any one of the above-mentioned attributes of God. If God were not all-good there would obviously be evil in the world because of the evil in the creator. Likewise, if God were not all-knowing, he could have created a world that he thought would be free of evil without knowing that evil would result from his creation. We could even understand God to be less than all-powerful, or we could imagine that God was not the sole creator of the universe. Any one of these options would explain the presence of evil.

Most Christians, however, have been reluctant to resolve this inconsistency by denying any one of these divine attributes. Instead, some have attempted to show that there is something wrong with our concept of evil.¹ Things may appear evil to us but that is to perceive things from our limited perspective; it is to view things in light of what we like or do not like. If we could see things from God’s eternal perspective, we would see them very differently. Unfortunately, the result of such a position is that it tends to make us less than compassionate. When people are suffering, if we believe that the evil they suffer is only apparent and not ultimately real, we will tend to lack the very important virtue of compassion. Jesus extended true compassion to people who suffered the evil of this world, and he calls us to do the same. A diminished capacity for compassion is a high price to pay for exonerating God as the cause of evil.

1. Danaher, *Eyes That See*, 75–77.

Over the centuries, philosophers and theologians have proposed a host of other possible ways to explain or justify the existence of evil. Most compelling for me is the idea of evil as instrumental. Philosopher John Hick has written extensively on the idea of evil as a necessary ingredient in God's purpose of making us into his likeness.² Hick claims that God has made us in his image and likeness,³ but although we bear the image of God from birth, the likeness of God takes a lifetime to develop. In that process, God uses what we call evil as an instrument to that purpose. Just as a medical operation might be painful and undesirable in itself, it can have the consequence of restoring us to health. Likewise, God uses what we consider evil to make us into his likeness.

Hick, like many people, thinks that God's perfecting of us and making us into his likeness is largely a matter of perfecting our moral behavior. The perfection that Jesus calls us to, however, is not about becoming like him in terms of being sinless but in terms of becoming his agents of forgiveness and mercy. Interestingly, if we find our perfection in our becoming forgiving rather than sinless, the existence of evil is very consistent with an all-good, all-knowing, and all-powerful sole creator. If what it means to follow Jesus is much more a matter of becoming agents of God's forgiveness and mercy, it makes sense that God would create a world that would give us the greatest possible opportunity to develop those divine attributes. If we are to become loving as God is loving and we extend our love to sinners and even our enemies⁴ through forgiveness and mercy, it makes sense that God would create a world full of sinners and enemies in order to give us the greatest possible opportunity to develop into his forgiving likeness.

Of course, we do not want a God whose purpose for our lives is to transform us into people who can love sinners and enemies.

2. Hick, *Evil*.

3. Gen 1:26.

4. Jesus washes the feet of Judas (John 13:2-5), and prays from the cross for his torturers to be forgiven in order that they might spend eternity with him (Luke 23:34).

We want God to be a moral cop, who enforces divine justice, which we imagine is a matter of rewarding good behavior and punishing bad behavior. We want God to be the enforcer of the kind of order we would want if we were God. If we were God, we would base our sovereignty upon power and reward those who obey us and punish those who dare to disobey. The God that Jesus reveals, however, bases his sovereignty upon forgiveness and love. The Jesus revelation is that of a loving God who desires to produce love within his creation. His great purpose behind creation is to create people who, like himself, are able to change others, not through the threat of force, but through forgiveness and love. In order to accomplish that purpose, we must participate by becoming ever more aware of the forgiveness he constantly extends to us.

Jesus tells us that “The one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.”⁵ Conversely, to love much, we must experience much forgiveness. We usually understand this to mean that the one with the greater sin and therefore greater forgiveness will love more, but that is a wrong way to understand the idea of receiving much forgiveness. We are forgetful creatures and no matter how great our offense might be, in no time, we forget its graveness and the grandness of the forgiveness we received. In fact, Jesus tells a story to illustrate this fact. He tells us of an unforgiving servant who, after his master has forgiven him a great deal, does not forgive another who owes him a very small amount.⁶ Like all of Jesus’ parables, this is not telling us about a particular unappreciative individual. Jesus is instead relating a universal truth that applies to almost all of us. We are all forgetful that others have forgiven us, and are acutely aware of the offenses we have suffered. The only way to reverse this process is to experience forgiveness on an almost constant basis. By constantly being aware of receiving forgiveness, we do, in time, become more forgiving ourselves and respond to others with forgiveness rather than a demand for justice. Thus, the one who habitually receives forgiveness is more likely to become forgiving than the one who

5. Luke 7:47. Scripture quotations are from the NRSV.

6. Matt 18:23–35.

experiences a single, great act of forgiveness that easily slips from memory.

This is the great problem with imagining that God forgives us in one act of atonement for all time, and never again suffers the offense of our sin. If Jesus suffered the offense of our sin, once and for all, then we have no continual need of repentance, and likewise no continual source from which to experience God's forgiveness. The truth is that God continues to suffer our rejection of him, and we continually need to repent and experience his forgiveness for our failure to love God the way that Jesus calls us to love him with our whole heart, soul, mind, and strength.

In order to understand this, we must see that our sin is much deeper than we imagine, and we grieve the heart of God long before any evil behavior appears. Likewise, God's desire is that we would repent long before any evil or destructive behavior appears; that is, that we would repent or turn back to an awareness of God's presence every time we find ourselves distracted from an awareness of his presence. God's desire is that we would all live the way Jesus lived; that is, in a constant awareness of the Father's presence. Whenever we leave such a state of prayer we need to turn back or repent. Our culture may imagine that the sins that separate us from God are things like murder or adultery, but Jesus was sinless not just because he avoided such behaviors, but because he was never distracted from an awareness of his Father's presence. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus offers many teachings in order to reveal sins that our culture finds difficult to see as sinful. In the story of the Great Banquet,⁷ the reason that people chose not to come to the feast was not that they chose instead to be at a crack house or bordello, but because they were doing business or getting married. We assume there is nothing wrong with doing business or getting married, but Jesus tells us that anything that keeps us from God's great banquet is cause for repentance. Indeed, we are almost all kept from the fullness of life that God has for us by innocuous activities that occupy us in ways that keep us from an awareness of God's presence.

7. Luke 14:16–24.

Jesus is constantly pointing out that the standard to which God is calling us is much greater than we would like to imagine, and that there is a judgment. The judgment is that we have all failed to live the fullness of life that God intends for us. The intention of judgment, however, is to bring us to repentance so that we may experience God's forgiveness. We have all gone our own way and sought to find life and meaning apart from God. Our hearts are prone to wander, but it is the recognition of that sin that causes us to return to an awareness of God's presence through repentance, and the experience of God's forgiveness.

At this point, we should better understand why an all-good and all-powerful creator would fashion a world where human beings would constantly be tempted to go off on their own to seek life and meaning apart from God. It is only in a world where the opportunity for sin and all the subsequent evil is abundant, that there is equally the opportunity to come to know the greatness of God's forgiveness and mercy. Such a world provides countless opportunities to both receive forgiveness from God and to practice our divine likeness by extending it to others.

We may find it strange that God would create a world so ripe with evil, but that is because we equate evil with pain and suffering, the absence of which we consider happiness. Jesus, however, points to a deeper, richer, and more divine happiness. The happiness he has for us draws us into the pain and suffering that is so much a part of forgiveness and love. We find this hard to understand. We want God to be who we would be if we were God. If we were God, we would destroy those portions of creation that did not immediately conform to our idea of what is good. We would punish the prodigal son while rewarding the good son.⁸ We, like Jonah, would have God punish evil and eliminate those people who are unlike us in their morality or theology. We understand neither God's love, nor his ultimate purpose behind creation, and therefore we do not understand his tolerance of evil. True, there are places in Scripture where God does seem to sanction violence in order to eliminate evil, but his desire is always to transform evil through forgiveness. Henri

8. Luke 15:11–32.

Nouwen puts it best. If evil is seen only as an irreversible, clearly visible, and sharply outlined tumor, then there is only one possibility: cut it out. Here, violence is necessary. But when evil is reversible and can be turned into good through forgiveness, then nonviolence becomes possible.⁹

God's desire is always for transformation through forgiveness, and it is for that reason that God is so tolerant of evil. Indeed, God tolerates evil and is "kind to the ungrateful and the wicked,"¹⁰ not simply because they are his creation—his beloved sons and daughters—but because God knows that the ungrateful and the wicked might be the very ones with the greatest potential to realize God's ultimate purpose. That is, they may have the greatest potential to become the forgiving and merciful likeness of Jesus. God knows that often the greatest sinner makes the greatest saint, and that we ultimately come to know who God is not by doing it right but by doing it wrong. We see many examples of this throughout Scripture: Moses, David, and Paul are murderers or accomplices to murder, and yet God uses them because they come to know God in a way that most of us never do. Likewise, in the genealogy of Jesus, of the five women mentioned, one is an adulteress, one a prostitute, and another pretends to be a prostitute in order to get pregnant from her own father-in-law. There is something about doing it wrong that makes us understand God's heart in a way that we never understand by doing it right. The father in the story of the prodigal loves the good, older son as much as the prodigal, but the prodigal comes to comprehend the father's love in a way that the good, older son never does.

In that same fifteenth chapter of Luke's Gospel, where Jesus tells the story of the Prodigal Son, he tells another parable about the Lost Sheep. At the end of that parable Jesus says, "I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent."¹¹ If the Gospel were about doing it

9. Nouwen, *Encounters*, 102.

10. Luke 6:35.

11. Luke 15:7.

right, why would there be more rejoicing over someone that did it wrong rather than those that do it right and have no need of repentance? What is so wonderful about repentance that there is rejoicing in heaven? There are probably many reasons for the rejoicing in heaven over the repentant sinner, but one is that only the repentant sinner knows who God is. We discover the truth of God's divine, forgiving nature only through repentance, and the experience of his forgiveness.

Of course, this does not mean that we should indulge in sinful behavior in order to experience God's forgiveness. That is not necessary since our sin occurs, and we grieve the heart of God, long before any evil behavior appears; we are ripe with opportunities for repentance and the experience of God's forgiveness. Likewise, we should not take all this talk to mean that we are not to oppose evil. Evil is to be opposed, but our opposition to evil should always be with compassion. Evil should always be opposed with the kind of compassion that will lead to repentance and the experience of God's forgiveness. The hope and purpose of our confrontation of evil, whether in others or ourselves, should always be intent upon bringing about the experience of God's forgiveness in order that we might be changed into his likeness. In order to do that, we must oppose evil and the suffering it produces in a very different way than that to which human beings have become accustomed. Jesus does not come into the world to destroy evil and suffering, but to show us how we can transform evil and suffering and therein be made ever more into God's forgiving and loving likeness.

The real key to understanding the problem of evil is to understand the incarnation. God not only created a world that abounds in evil and suffering, but he entered into that world in order to show us how to become like him in terms of forgiveness and love. This is the great mystery of incarnation. Some atonement theories have tried to end that mystery and explain atonement as a matter of God punishing Jesus for our sin, but the revelation of Jesus on the cross is the revelation of a God who transforms evil by suffering it and releasing it through forgiveness. This is the divine revelation of the cross; and those that have taken it seriously and have followed Jesus to their own

crosses by suffering evil and releasing it through forgiveness, have found themselves become a little more like God.

There is something so divinely beautiful about God entering into the suffering of the world that it confounds our understanding, but although our understanding may not comprehend it, we can experience it ourselves by entering into the suffering of others. Think of the person you love most in this world and recall those times when you felt closest to them—when you felt that closeness that goes beyond what we normally feel as human beings. They were almost always times of suffering. Nothing brings us together like suffering. Great suffering and great love are the things that transform us, and they are often experienced together.

Sadly, this is not the message we all too often hear from religious people. Instead we are told that religious righteousness is about confronting evil with violence and eliminating it rather than transforming it and letting it transform us. What we hear from most religious people is that God hates evil and the suffering it causes, and obedient followers of God should do everything in their power to eliminate it. What is behind such thinking is the idea of holiness as sinlessness. That was certainly the Pharisees notion of holiness, but Jesus tells us that holiness is very different from what the Pharisees imagined. Jesus' notion of being holy, as God is holy, is not a matter of being sinless, but a matter of being merciful and forgiving as God is merciful and forgiving. That kind of holiness only comes through an ever-greater experience of God's mercy and forgiveness. Such experience is not the result of increased sin in our lives but an increased awareness of the depth of our sin.

There have always been these two very different notions of holiness. Unfortunately, the pharisaic notion of holiness as sinlessness is the more common among religious people, while the kind of holiness of which Jesus speaks is rarer. Rare as it may be, however, we can still see that kind of holiness in those individuals who are conscious of the depth of their sin, and consequently live in an almost constant state of repentance and the experience of God's mercy and forgiveness. These are God's

agents of the mercy and forgiveness by which the world continues to be transformed.

Bibliography

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