

Evil Is Evil

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[0 : 0 0] Well, tonight we are continuing our series that's called Doctrine for Mission. The aim of this series is to think about sharing our faith. That's something that we all want to do as Christians. It's something that we all know that we need to do as Christians. It's something that we all find really hard as Christians. We want people around us, the people in our homes, the people we work with, the people in this community who want them to hear about Jesus. We want to tell them about Jesus. But it's hard to do that and often we don't know where to start and often we feel inadequate. The aim of this series is to remind ourselves of some key theological truths that provide a foundation for us as we seek to share our faith. It's the doctrine that we need to go out on mission. And so we've been thinking about various key truths over the past few weeks. We're nearing the end. We've just got another two weeks after this Sunday. We're going to be thinking just for another two or three weeks on this topic. As I'm sure you know, among the many objections to Christianity that have appeared over the centuries, one of the most common is what's known as the problem of evil. The argument goes along something along the lines of, if there's a God, why is there so much suffering in the world? And many people have said that over the years. Perhaps the most famous advocate of that argument is the 18th century Scottish philosopher David Hume. If any of you have been to Edinburgh, there's a statue of David

Hume near the top of the Royal Mile and he was a famous skeptic in the Scottish Enlightenment. He reasoned that the existence of a good and powerful God cannot be compatible with the reality of evil. He said, if God can't stop evil, then he's not powerful. And if God won't stop evil, then he's not good. And so that was his argument against the existence of God. And many other people have said the same kind of thing over the years. The problem of evil is a common objection to Christianity. How do we answer that? How do we respond to that problem? Well, first of all, it's worth noting that if you take God out of the equation, you actually create an even bigger problem because you have to try and explain what makes something good in the first place. But secondly, it's important to note that the solution doesn't actually lie in the question of who God is or what God can or cannot do. That's what

David Hume tried to do. He tried to make the question about God. But that's not where the answer lies because the question isn't about that. The answer to the question lies in who we are. And in regard to who we are, the Bible teaches us that we have been created with an extraordinary dignity which places humanity in a position of unique privilege and unique responsibility. And a key aspect of that dignity, which makes us different to any part of the creation, the key aspect of that dignity, was freedom. And as I'm sure you know, freedom is simultaneously a wonderful privilege and a solemn responsibility. Anybody who's helped a toddler climb the stairs for the first time will know that the moment you grant freedom, it creates a wonderful opportunity to thrive, but it also introduces an all too real risk of falling. And it's our failure to use that freedom wisely that has resulted in a broken world. Humanity rebelled, sinned and fell from the place that God had created us to enjoy. Now that's not a reality that people find easy to accept, especially today.

We live in a world that's got a very individualistic mindset that shapes the society around us. And because of that, we want to isolate ourselves from personal guilt and blame. And we also want to detach ourselves from any idea of corporate responsibility. David Hume wanted to make the problem of evil God's problem, not ours. But in doing so, we're just trying yet again to mask the fact that the reality of sin and suffering in the world is a consequence of our actions. In fact, if you think about it a wee bit, it's quite ironic that the David Hume's of this world want to be free enough to judge God and yet simultaneously claim that we aren't free enough to be held responsible for ignoring him. The truth is, we have abused the privilege of freedom and we've got no one to blame but ourselves. But putting that to one side for many people today, when it comes to Christianity, thinking about evil is a big problem. But what I want us to see tonight is that when it comes to sharing the gospel, thinking about evil is actually immensely helpful. In fact, rather than being a stumbling block, thinking about evil can be a goldmine of encouragement as we seek to tell others about Jesus. But in order for us to get that help, we have got to recognise that evil is evil. And that's possibly one of the strangest sermon titles I've ever had, but I hope that it's one that you'll understand and that will be helpful. That's our title for this evening and we're going to read these verses again from Romans 12.

Good. At first glance, to say evil is evil is not controversial. You're going to struggle to find anybody who disagrees with that no matter what their beliefs might be. But if we think about it a little bit more, I think we discover that although we might say that evil is evil, the way that we live our lives says something very different. And here's three examples of how this can happen. Number one, I think we live in a day where in many ways evil is acceptable.

[7 : 22] Now that doesn't apply to all forms of evil and thankfully there are still many wrongs that are called out and held to account. But it is the case that many evil things are now accepted. It can happen in two main ways, I think. On the one hand, you've got societies that endorse actions that are morally indefensible. And I think over the past 60 years the rise of abortion would be maybe the most tragic example of that in recent history. Paul speaks about this sort of thing in Romans 1 when he talks about the fact that people not only do things that are wrong but they give approval to those who do them. So on the one hand, you know, things that are wrong can be endorsed by societies. But on the other hand, and this is the more dangerous one for us, we can so easily resign ourselves to the evil that's around us that we can reach the point where something horrendous just doesn't actually bother us anymore. So high drug deaths in Scotland, we just see that as inevitable. When you look at the news, when dozens of people are killed in a car bomb in sub-Saharan Africa or Central Asia, it is never ever as big a headline as who won the Oscars. And even in church, we've long since grown numb to the horrific reality of a divided Christian family. And all of that's a long way from what Paul says in Romans 12-9 when he says, to abhor what is evil. So today, evil is often acceptable. Number two, today evil is entertaining.

And you can see that in a thousand ways. Books, newspapers, TV shows, movies, internet, all of these things provide a feast of entertainment that glamourizes behaviour. That's appalling.

When I say that, I'm not saying that the arts, you know, like a book or a film, not saying that that must never ever ever present something that's sinful. Even the Bible does that. You look at the wisdom literature of the Old Testament and it describes many evil things in order to make a point. We're not saying that you must, you know, never ever ever display sin in a movie or anything like that. That's not what I'm saying. What I am saying is that we've long since gone way past the point of appropriate presentation of something that's immoral in order to express an important reality. Instead, we've made the immoral a fantasy that we just can't get enough of.

But it's not just the entertainment industry that does that. It's not just books that we read. Even our conversations can slip down the same kind of path. In Romans 1 again, Paul lists the kind of things that are abhorrent to God. He lists the debased activities and you've got big things like murder, haters of God, that kind of thing. But you've also got gossip, slander, boasting.

[10 : 57] And I look at my own life and I can see that there's times when I've delighted in a bit of scandal, times when I've made a joke at the expense of others and all too often all of us can like to think that which is that me bit better than other people, especially those who are different from us. So evil can be a sort of entertainment. It's really easy to fall into that trap. So one evil is acceptable. Two evil is entertaining. Three and most worryingly of all, today evil is useful. Deceit can take you to the very top of politics.

That's blindingly obvious and written today. Exploitation of a labour force can make you very, very rich. And disclosing private information about somebody can give you an awful lot of power.

And so many people suffer because they're on the receiving end of evil behaviour that's being used by people in order to get what they want. We live in a world today where evil is acceptable.

Evil's entertaining. Evil is useful. Over against all of that, the Bible, thank God, tells us that evil is evil. It's not acceptable. It's not entertaining. And it absolutely must not be used must not be used to accomplish anything. It's hideous. And this is where we need to realise that the abhorrence for evil that the Bible asks for, when it says to abhor what is evil, that's not the kind of fun-spoiling demands of religious fanaticism. As if, you know, no one's supposed to have any fun or ever be happy. It's not saying that at all. It's recognising that evil is absolutely horrible. And it's pleading with us. The Bible is pleading with us to understand that and to avoid it because evil is the stuff that wrecks precious individuals.

It destroys our communities. It devastates humanity. Evil is evil. Now, this is an occasion where many people seem to make very big and very bizarre misunderstandings of Christianity. Because you discover this when you ask the question, what kind of behaviour do people think is offensive to God? So if you're going to sort of say to yourself, okay, well, you know, we're talking about evil, what kind of stuff do Christians think is evil?

[13 : 59] What kind of behaviour is offensive to God? And there seems to be some astonishing misunderstandings to this question. And you discover that when you look at the things that people apologise to you for when they find out that you're a Christian. And maybe that's happened to you. It's happened to me many times that they discover that you're a Christian and that they apologise for the aspect of behaviour that they think is most offensive to you. The one that I come across most is swearing.

Now, by that I mean bad language. I don't mean blasphemy. People hardly ever apologise for blasphemy, but just bad language, you know, the sort that you hear. There's so many times that people have sworn in front of me and then they've realized they're a Christian, like, oh, sorry, I'm so sorry that I swore. And they kind of frantically apologise. So swearing is something that they think is, you know, that's the thing we must apologise for. Another is church attendance.

And maybe I get that more because I'm a minister, but people, you know, if they've missed church, they'll apologise for it because, you know, they think that that's the thing that we're going to be really bothered about. And then the most bizarre of all is children.

People apologise when children make a noise in church or they disrupt something or do something like that. Now, this is bocker. Now, I'm not saying that swearing is right. It's true that swearing is not a good thing to do. It's true that church attendance matters. The children one is ridiculous because God delights to hear children's voices. But the key question is, is this the stuff that really bothers God? Is this what's really offensive to us as Christians? Is this the behaviour that demands an apology? Not according to the Bible. Scripture shows us that there's other things that really bother God. And here's some examples. Injustice. Again and again, particularly in the

Old Testament, God was angered by the cruelty and neglect that was shown towards the vulnerable. A cutting example of that is in Isaiah chapter one, where God says that he is absolutely fed up with the national religious observance of Israel. He says, what is, what to me is the multitude of your sacrifices. I've had enough of your burnt offerings and of the fat of well-fed beasts. I do not delight in it. Why? Why was he so disgusted by the acts of piety? It was because while they were putting on this outward show of religious observance, they were corrupt and they were, they were abandoning their responsibilities to the poor. How the faithful city has become a whole. She was full of justice. Righteousness lodged in her, but now murdered her. Your silver has become dross. Your best wine mixed with water. Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not bring justice to the fatherless and the widows cause does not come to them. In other words, the most vulnerable in the nation are being tossed aside. And today we live in a world that is still full of injustice.

[17 : 40] You only have to look at the distribution of wealth to see that that's through to the God whose commitment to justice is utterly impeccable. That is a great deal. Another one is deceit.

Psalms 34, keep your tongue from evil and from your lips from speaking deceit. You may know that in the Psalms there's a common parallel, a common pattern called parallelism where you get the same thing said twice in slightly different ways, usually with a bit of an intensification in the second half of it. So you can see the parallelism here very carefully. You got tongue and lips are paralleled there and you've got evil and deceit parallel there. So there's a really close connection there between lying and evil. James says the same kind of thing. No human being contained the tongue.

It's a restless evil full of deadly poison. The Bible never underestimates the potential for harm that can come through deception. And that's a reminder that our words, whether they're spoken, written or typed, can so easily be inaccurate. All too often they can be dishonest and they're highly likely to be very damaging. Today we're swamped by half truths, fake news, spin and manipulation to the God whose commitment to truth is absolute. That kind of deceit is evil.

A third example is abuse. The Bible frequently uses the image of a shepherd to describe those who are in positions of leadership. Sometimes that's positive like with David. He's described in very positive terms as a shepherd as Israel's greatest king in the Old Testament. At other times though, the Bible uses the shepherd imagery to give a sharp rebuke to those who are in leadership.

There's an example in Jeremiah chapter 23. Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture, declares the Lord. Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who care for my people. And I notice it's not talking about sheep, it's talking about the people, the shepherds who care for my people. You've scattered my flock and have driven them away, you've not attended to them. Behold, I will attend to you for your evil deeds, declares the Lord.

[20 : 08] You see exactly the same thing in Ezekiel chapter 34. In the Old Testament, leaders failed because they mistreated the people who depended on them. And today things are no different. Power is abused. That happens in homes, that happens in workplaces, that happens in big corporations, that happens in nations, it even happens in churches. To God in whom infinite, eternal and unchangeable power is never divorced from infinite, eternal and unchangeable goodness, to that God. When people use power and authority to abuse people, it is a hideous evil.

So we've seen injustice, deceit, abuse. Let me give you one more. Revenge. This is a really important one to think about because this is the one place where evil can actually seem okay.

Because when we've been on the receiving end of evil ourselves, it seems fair to do the same back. If someone lies to us, well, I think I can lie in return. If someone hurts us, well, it's quite nice to see them get hurt too. If someone treats us unfairly, it can feel quite good to do the same or worse back. What does Romans 12 say about that sort of thing?

It says, it says, never, never avenge yourselves. Don't repay evil for evil. Do not be overcome by evil, overcome evil with good. Peter says exactly the same thing. Do not repay evil for evil.

And both Peter and Paul are just repeating what Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount that you can read at the end of Matthew 5. All of these show us that in God's eyes, evil is not acceptable. It's never entertaining. It must not be used. Evil is to be abhorred.

[22 : 26] It's unfair because it's a tool for dishing out injustice to people. It's wrong because it deceives people with lies. It's dangerous because it leaves people bruised and scarred and it's toxic.

Left unchecked, it will poison and pollute our lives. Evil is evil. Now, you might be asking yourself, well, okay, Thomas, what on earth has any of that got to do with shading the gospel? Well, what I hope you can see is that this can be incredibly helpful to us because it presses home to us two key truths that lie at the heart of why we want to tell other people about Jesus. First, recognizing that evil is evil reminds us of why the gospel is urgently needed. It reminds us why the gospel is urgently needed. Now, if you look at your own lives, we discover that when it comes to evil, it's both something that we do and it's something that's done to us. So sometimes we're the ones whose behavior is wrong. Our thoughts, our speech, our actions, they're all potential channels for evil to flow through. And one of the most sobering experiences that we can ever have is to realize just what a human being is capable of. So sometimes it's something that we do, but equally, we can be on the receiving end of evil behavior.

And I don't need to tell you how awful that is when it happens. All around us, there's people who are being battered physically, emotionally, and spiritually by the ruthless reality of evil.

All of that means that we can cheat and get cheated. We can deceive and get deceived. We can hurt and we can get hurt. And that's why it's not the case that, you know, there's some people who are good and there's some people who are evil. The reality is that we're all a mixture of both. We're humans made by God to bear his image. We're sinners, marred by corruption. When it comes to evil, we are all too capable. And we are very, very vulnerable. And the key point is that we desperately need deliverance from both of those things. And everyone in your family, everyone you work with, everyone in this community, they desperately need deliverance from all of that as well.

And this is where we must remember that when we try to share the gospel, we're not trying to sell something. So often evangelism can feel like that. We can feel like we need to be a bit like a sales person trying to sell a product that people don't really want. And with that mindset, evangelism can feel awkward. It can even feel embarrassing. And sometimes it can even run the risk of being a bit shallow. But if we remember that evil is evil, it reminds us what the gospel is actually saving people from. It shows us how urgently the gospel is needed. And that shifts us away from thinking that we're selling something that people may or may not want. And instead, it shows us that we are sharing something that people desperately need. And this is where it's maybe helpful to think about the difference between a car salesman and a car mechanic.

[26 : 08] So when a car salesman sees a customer, usually they're going to have to use a lot of skill to convince the customer that the car in front of them is a good buy. And so a salesman's got to be persuasive. They've got to be confident. And very often they've got to be quite charming. And a huge amount rests on the talent of the salesman. And I don't know if it's so much the case now, but for many years, you know, salesmen ran on commission. So the better you edit, the more money that you got.

And so there was a lot riding on the skills and talents of the salesperson. And I think that that's why it's a very hard job. That's a job I could never, ever do. I don't think I could handle it. A car salesman's got to be persuasive, confident, charming. A car mechanic doesn't have to bother with any of that. A mechanic doesn't have to charm the customer. A mechanic simply has to tell them what they need. And to get the customer on board, the only thing that the mechanic needs to be is trustworthy. And that's why as long as the customer isn't an idiot, when a trustworthy mechanic tells them you need this, then they are going to listen.

As you try to share your faith, you are much, much more like the mechanic than you are like the salesman. You don't need to schmooze people into following Jesus as though you're trying to sell them something, as though our religion is the better buy in comparison to all the others on offer. You don't need to think like that. Instead, you need to remember that evil is evil, that the people around us desperately need to accurately hear the gospel. They need us to accurately tell it to be humble and sincere and trustworthy, to tell them that, look, the gospel is going to meet your deepest need. And when someone is bruised and crushed by the reality of evil, even if they don't even realize that it's happening, we're not coming to them with kind of self-help therapy that's one of many things on offer. We are coming to them with the only thing that will actually rescue them. That's what we've got when we share the gospel. And this is where we've got to make sure that we get our motives right. If our motivation is a desire for people just to be persuaded by us, to listen to our religion, to realize that we are right, then there's a danger that when we evangelize, we're going to come across that our biggest concern is for ourselves. This is something that I sometimes wonder about. Sometimes you have other religious groups who will go from door to door and they want to kind of share their beliefs, but that's in order to secure their place in heaven. So it's more about them than about the person who's door that they're knocking at. And that's not what our motivation should lie. Our biggest concern must not be for ourselves. And if our motivation is that the person in front of us would be rescued from evil and from all the devastation that it brings, then the people we speak to are going to see that our biggest concern is for them and that we long to see them saved. The more that we recognize that evil is evil, the more our motivation is going to arise from the fact that people around us are in desperate need. We need to always remember that Jesus has never, ever said, I came to get a big flock of people following me. Jesus didn't say that. Jesus said,

I came to seek and to save the lost. Remembering that evil is evil will remind us of how urgently needed the gospel is. But secondly, and lastly, recognizing that evil is evil reminds us of why the gospel is utterly brilliant. So yes, a clear understanding of evil shows us how broken the world is. It shows us how precarious humanity's circumstances now are. And although that's crucial, recognizing that the gospel is needed isn't enough on its own. Because if it is, if that's just all we have, if that's just the one truth that we're going to say that you need this, then that can result in an evangelism that is simply proclaiming an alternative to bad news, as though in a world of evil, following Jesus is the least rubbish option. But the gospel is way better than that.

It's way better than that. And we see that by recognizing that evil is evil. That's because a clear understanding of evil shows us just what Jesus is rescuing us from and shows us what an incredible difference Jesus is going to make to our lives. And so in a world full of evil, Jesus gives us a better identity. And that means that no matter who you are, no matter what your story is, in Jesus, you're a precious, beloved, treasured child of God. That means that you don't need to deceive your way into success. You don't need to use people to gain status. You don't need to chase satisfaction and some sinful pleasure. And you don't need to take revenge when somebody hurts you in order to feel better. You don't need any of that because in Jesus you are loved, gifted, valued, respected, treasured. He gives us an identity that fills the gap that nothing else can fill. When we point people to Jesus, that's what we're offering them. In a world of evil, Jesus gives us a better morality. So our culture today tells us that life is dog eat dog. Jesus says, bind up the wounds of the broken. Our culture says today, indulge yourself. Jesus says, control yourself. Our culture says, what you're doing, your private life is up to you. Jesus says,

[32 : 33] I want you to be pure to the very core of your heart. Our culture loves getting, Jesus says, giving is way better. Our culture loves exposing people's mistakes. Jesus says, do not judge.

Our culture is quite willing to lie. Jesus can't lie. Our culture has often masked abuse. Jesus will call every single injustice to account. Our culture is full of division, inequality and prejudice. Jesus calls everyone, everyone, no matter their gender, their class, their status, their culture, their race, their history. He calls everyone into a beautiful family of unity and equality. When we point people to Jesus, that's what we're offering them.

And in our world of evil, Jesus gives us a better destiny. The reality of evil has stained every generation of human history before us and it casts a very long and very dark shadow over our future. That's probably why people don't like thinking about what lies ahead. As individuals, the inevitability of death hangs over us all. For humanity as a whole, the threat of self-destruction is real, whether it's through war, disease, climate change, disaster or a combination of them all.

Either way, it feels like ultimately evil's going to win. Humanity seems destined for destruction and you pick any other of the popular world views in Britain today, that's ultimately where they're going to take you. Jesus changes all that.

Jesus says something magnificently different. Jesus has come to break the power of death. Jesus has come to give us eternal life. Jesus has come to restore the universe into our new heavens and a new earth where all the curse of evil will be gone forever. That's what Jesus has come to achieve. That's the new destiny that we can have in him because of Jesus. Evil will never win.

[34 : 43] And that's what makes the gospel so utterly brilliant and when we point people to Jesus, that's what we're offering them. And so yes, evil is definitely a problem, not because it undermines the existence of a good and powerful God, but because it's destroying us and the world that God created for us to enjoy. But the answer is not to ignore it and pretend it's not there.

The answer is not to never think about it. We've got to acknowledge the reality of evil. We've got to get a better grasp of the evilness of evil. So often our evangelism can be hampered by the mindset that thinks that the gospel isn't urgent and that the gospel isn't brilliant. Both of those things are lies. The gospel is the most urgent thing that the people you will meet this week need to hear in their lives. The gospel is the most urgent thing they need to hear.

The gospel is also the most brilliant thing that they're going to hear. It's the most amazing news that they can ever hear. We can share our faith because we have a message that's urgent and brilliant.

In order to see that, we've got to remember that evil is evil. That's what Jesus has come to rescue us from.

That's the difference that he can make. Every Christian here can say that's the difference he has made and it's outstanding. Anyone who's not getting a Christian, that's the difference he will make.

[36 : 28] Evil is evil. So please, please, in the name of God, run from it and run to Jesus with him. Evil can never win. Amen. Let's pray.

Father, help us to have a clear understanding. Forgive us for when we've tolerated or overlooked or even enjoyed evil. Instead, help us to see that evil is evil and instead, we pray that we would embrace the new identity that we have in Jesus. We pray that we would conform to the better morality that you give to us and we pray that we would just rejoice in the new destiny that we have through your Son, our Savior. We pray that that amazing news would be on our lips this week. We pray that we'd be able to proclaim that. We pray that you'd give us the courage and the wisdom that we need to share good news in a world where there's so much evil. Please help us. We want we want so much to be able to share this message. Please equip us and empower us and use us for your glory. In Jesus' name, amen. We're going to conclude singing together from Psalm 22.

Murdoch's going to come up and present. We're going to sing from Psalm 22 from the Scottish Psalter and the a we section towards the end from verses 23 to 26. These are wonderful words just speaking of just the amazing message that we have that we want to declare to the people around us.

So we stand to sing and Murdoch will lead us.

And through the Lord God through his feet your heart shall never live.

[40 : 29] The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen. Thanks so much for being with us today. I also forgot to mention my apologies at the start that I'm going to be away for a couple of days. During the week I've been asked to attend a portion Manchester and so I'll be away from Monday evening through to Thursday evening. So Phil is going to be taking the prayer meeting on Thursday so I'm very grateful to Phil for doing that and it'll be meeting on zoom and if there's if anybody needs anything when I'm away please just contact one of the elders or Phil and they'll be able to help you but as I said I'm only away for just for the three nights so it's not for long. I hope you have a lovely week. It's been so good to see you so wonderful to worship together and it's so exciting to go into this week serving Jesus as his people. Thank you.