

How to Identify and Avoid Evil

Romans 7:14-25; Genesis 3:1-21

The Big Idea: Practicing our faith includes working for justice.

Learning Goal: Learners will understand evil as a force in the world and their lives, and will gain confidence to combat it.

Opening: Begin by sharing a high and low from this past week. When each person has had a chance to listen and share, open your session together by praying the following prayer together, out loud.

Opening Prayer

Leader: Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world,

A: Have mercy on us.

L: Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world,

A: Grant us peace.

L: Righteous God, you know the evils of the world and the evils within us. Give to us a sense of your mercy and justice, that we might live according to your commands, and model our actions after Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord.

A: Amen

Read: In the course of his ministry, Jesus often taught about the distinction between good and evil. In Matthew 7:15-18, Jesus warns that false prophets will be known by their fruit. Later, in Matthew 12:33-35, Jesus wrestles with the Pharisees, people who were trying, through strictly keeping the Torah (the law), to honor their relationship with God. However, Jesus saw that their behavior was more about this fixation on doing things perfectly than on keeping and implementing God's will. He clearly did not respect their religious leadership.

Identifying evil can be easy. There are some things that simply are evil: sexual abuse, domestic violence, murder, genocide. However, it is more often the case that evil is subtle and insinuating. Evil tends to sneak up on us. A student might see another's answer sheet by accident, but then should he or she use the answer seen? We might choose to purchase a larger car because we need to carry more stuff, but is it right to contribute that much more to the destruction of the ozone layer? We may, in frustration, talk about an acquaintance to another person rather than to the one who is annoying us. When does this cross over from asking for advice or support to gossip? How can we know in more subtle instances what is evil and what is not?

Evil has many sources in the history of faith. Natural calamities can be seen as the result of an imperfect world—the evil that simply is around us. We could also interpret the destruction we experience as a result of our own short-sightedness. (Should we be building homes in a flood plain?) Human behavior that is destructive or stands in the way of God's justice and mercy has also been labeled evil. The devil, or Satan, has emerged in human theology as the source of evil. "The devil made me do it" has been a meaningful excuse for centuries of human experience in one way or another.

Martin Luther would give evil its first home in original sin, which he defined as unbelief. All of us, he would say, struggle to let God be God. This can manifest itself either as pride (I'm taking over) or passivity (I'm

not worth it). In both cases, we do not trust God to be - we don't believe that God is sufficiently active, or we don't believe that God gave us a place in the enterprise of God's will at work in the world.

If God's will were perfectly clear, it would be much easier to discern what was evil or not. "If it makes for life rather than death" might be a shorthand way of weighing the good of something against the bad. In most cases, an action will never be clearly one or the other, in spite of Matthew's metaphor that the good tree produces good fruit and the bad produces bad. Things are so much more complex, just as God's will is complex.

"Life" is not just my life or just your life. Implied is the life of the whole creation, all of which God loves. Implied also is the life of those yet to come (as in the Iroquois tradition of considering each decision for its impact on the next seven generations). So, as we seek good, our perspective needs to take on God's universality. God's justice and mercy is not simply for those who call themselves Christian, or for those who call themselves a particular kind of Christian.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German World War II theologian, was invited to join a plot to take Hitler's life. He was a pacifist, but he was well aware of the evil inherent in Hitler's regime. He, and many in his family, were in active resistance. Finally, after much prayer and deliberation, he decided to join. Though joining the plot was in direct disobedience of the fifth commandment, "Thou shalt not kill," he chose what he perceived to be the lesser of two evils. In explanation, he said he chose to make the best decision he could, and then rely on God's costly grace. (See the chapter on costly grace in Bonhoeffer's *The Cost of Discipleship*.) His resistance cost him his life, but he is remembered as one who followed his convictions with action.

So we are also called. Our life is one of discernment. God's will may not be clear. God's justice and mercy are not often obvious. Sometimes doing the right thing will cost us. Sometimes not. The point is to seek God's perspective, and to seek to be an agent of God's will and way in the world.

My Faith Story

Describe a time in your own life when you felt tempted, but made a choice for good. What were the circumstances? What were the choices that were pulling you? What resources did you use to make your decision? Describe ways that daily decisions about the food we eat, the cars we drive, and the friends we make affect others.

How to Identify and Avoid Evil...Tips

The devil delights in unnoticed evil. To this end, the devil employs a wide array of lies, disguises and deceptions while attacking our relationships with God and each other. A sharp eye and vigilance are your best defense. Lutherans dislike the subject of evil, but many secretly cultivate extraordinary talent at rooting it out.

- 1) Know your enemy - Evil appears in many forms, most often using camouflage to present itself as kindly or friendly. Cruelty, hatred, violence and exploitation are among the many forms evil can take, but it often masquerades as justice or something done "for their own good". Be alert to acts, people, and events that employ these methods, even if the eventual outcome appears good.
- 2) Proceed carefully and deliberately - Avoid rushing to conclusions. Use good judgment.
- 3) Take action to expose the evil - Evil relies on darkness. It wants to remain hidden and hates the light of truth. Things that suffer from public knowledge or scrutiny might be evil.

4) Be prepared to make a personal sacrifice – Fighting evil can be costly. A successful counterattack may require you to give up something you cherish. For Jesus, as for many of his followers, it was his life. Love is the foundation of sacrifice that combats evil.

5) Stay vigilant – Evil’s genius is shown in disguise, deception, and misdirection. Maintain your objectivity and apply the Biblical measures of right and wrong you know to be correct.

Bible Connection: Wrestling with Sin

- Read Romans 7:14-25 together. Even Paul, the great apostle, struggled under sin and shared this with his readers. Often we know what we should be doing, but find it difficult to do it. Still, Paul thanks God for grace through Jesus Christ, and we also can be thankful for grace.
- Open your Bibles to Genesis 3:1-21. As Christians, this is often described as the fall. This story helps us to recognize how sin is woven into our own humanity. When confronted with sin, we have a tendency to blame others. In the Genesis account, Adam blames Eve for giving him the fruit, and Eve blames the serpent who tricked her. This story also teaches us about consequences, where we learn about our misdeeds the hard way. Yet even in this ancient story, we can find God's grace, as God made clothes (verse 21) for the man and the woman.

Closing Questions

- What evils can you identify in the world? In your own experience?
- What are some resources you might use to combat evil?
- What one issue concerns you as a matter of injustice?

Closing Ritual

L: Creator God, you made the world and pronounced it good.

A: Renew the face of the earth.

L: Redeeming God, you call your people from sinful ways wherever they stray.

A: Forgive us, cleanse us, and make us whole.

L: Holy Spirit, you breathe resurrection into what was dead and sustain us into your promised future.

A: Keep us strong in faith and in righteous living. Amen