

Am I Really That Bad?

On a cold winter day my Hungarian friend, Norbi, and I engaged in a most interesting conversation about the depravity of man. In the midst of the conversation, an elderly woman for some quaint reason decided to introduce herself and encourage these *two young boys* by extolling the virtues of humanity and the goodness of mankind. “Your future is bright and you have the whole world in front of you. You are good people with great promise.” Norbi, the pensive Hungarian, recognized that this lady spoke antithetically to our previous conversation. He began to point to certain scriptures elucidating that men are inherently evil who possess no capacity for good. The lady’s radiant countenance of hope changed to a savage scowl. “I don’t believe it! I have seen good people do good things! What about the Ghandi’s and the Mother Theresa’s of the world!? I suppose that they didn’t do anything good as well!”

Most people consent to their own shortcomings as a result of human nature. Yet, few admit to possessing no capacity for good. As we reside in a self-serving world in which people manipulate and malign others to exalt their own purposes and pursuits, individuals like Ghandi and Mother Theresa stand out. These individuals exist as examples of sacrificial servants who sought to rectify the repression so rampant in the third world. However, the Bible makes it crystal clear that “There is none righteous, not even one” (Rom. 3:10) and that “all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment” (Is. 64:6). Many find it difficult to harmonize these passages with the works of “saintly men.” Yet, the luminance of their work fades when compared with the majesty and purity of God.

“Holy, Holy, Holy is the LORD of hosts” (Is. 6:3). God’s Holiness distinguishes Him from all that is common and profane. It connotes the sharp division between the Creator and His creation. Therefore, while creation flounders in its sin cursed existence; the Holy God transcends these moral imperfections. This stands in contrast to sinful man who changes and evolves as time and trials shape his perception of reality. God’s Holiness preserves God as God. We can have absolute assurance that God will never raise his standards or lower them. He executes his judgments perfectly. This sense of perfection drives his other attributes. For instance, holiness preserves and guards God’s wrath, love, mercy, wisdom, and righteousness. The effects of sin or ignorance will never contaminate these attributes.

Holiness relates to God’s moral purity as He utterly abstains from every moral imperfection. By abstaining from moral imperfection God has made Himself by default morally perfect. When the longtime king, Uzziah died, the Lord appeared to the prophet Isaiah to reassure him of the nations political stability. Even though their earthly king had passed away, they had no need to fear as their heavenly Sovereign reigns supremely. The appearance of the Lord terrified the prophet and compelled him to echo “Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips” (Is. 6: 5). The very presence of an invincible, infinite, and infallible God confronts a fragile, finite, fallible man of his own weakness. Similarly, when humans grasp the greatness and utter majesty of the Lord, they cannot help but realize how far they, “fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23).

As a Holy God who practices perfection in all of His ways, God demands Holiness from his subjects. “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am Holy” (Lev. 19:2). A truly benevolent King would only desire what is truly good. Similarly, a Holy

God desires holiness. He commands his created subjects to conform to the character and likeness of their creator. To expect anything less would reflect an unholy tolerance of failure. Consequently, when we do not meet this expectation (which according to Rom. 3:23 all of us fall short) God's perfect righteousness mandates punishment. By "the righteousness of God" we mean that God always acts in accordance with what is right, as He himself is the final standard of what is right.¹ In the words of Habakkuk, "Thine eyes are too pure to approve evil, and Thou canst not look on wickedness with favor" (Hk. 1:13). The slaughter of innocent unborn children, the genocide of the Jews, the wicked repression of tyrants such as Stalin, the macabre acts of Manson's murders, and the like must be punished. If you presented one hundred clearly guilty ax-murderers to a judge, and he found ninety-nine of them guilty and one of them innocent, he would still be characterized as generally but not perfectly righteous. The judge did the right thing in almost every instance. Similarly, if God does not punish every transgression against Him, He ceases to be perfectly righteous. Therefore, God's righteousness demands that all sin, every transgression against Him, must be punished.

When we compare to Adolf Hitler, Ted Bundy, and Charles Manson to ourselves, we might be tempted to perceive ourselves as righteous. However, in evaluating our own sense of goodness and righteousness, we deceive ourselves when we make the "scum of the earth" the measuring bar. God possesses the standard of righteousness by which all men will be measured. Any action, which falls short of God's righteous standards, equals sin.

¹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*. (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press; Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan Publishing House, HarperCollins Publisher, 1994), 203.

Many men make the folly of limiting sin to the external realm alone. We chastise national leaders for their inability to contain their lust as they engage in immoral relationships. Similarly, the public sets aside murderers as social cockroaches, humans full of hate who lost the right to live. Thus, being a faithful spouse or a “non-murderer” accentuates your righteousness in the sight of men. Yet, God evaluates men with a different standard.

In the time of Christ, a distinguished group of devout Jews elevated their own righteousness in the sight of men. Adherence to the sixth commandment, “Thou shall not murder,” and the seventh commandment, “Thou shall not commit adultery” aptly justified their claim if these commandments were taken in the strictest sense. Under these criterion, most of the Pharisees if not most of the world could declare themselves righteous in the sight of men. Unimpressed, Jesus probes deeper.

In Matthew 5:22 Jesus condemns three violations of the commandment “Thou shall not murder.” He equates being angry with your brother with being guilty of murder before a court. Furthermore, the Supreme Court of the land would find one angry enough to call his brother “Raca” (or numbskull) is guilty of murder. Finally, the one unable to control his contempt and calls his brother as a “Fool” would be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell. Clearly, from Jesus’ point of view, anger is synonymous with murder. The only difference between Charles Manson and an “average” man in a fit of rage is that Manson acted upon his rage. For someone who grew up in the suburbs with a solid family and superb education, such murderous actions seem irrational. In fact, people might restrict such devious actions since such sadistic acts would destroy their social standing. Yet, take the same person, and give him absolutely nothing. Teach him that his

life is of no consequence and that other lives are worthless as well. Brainwash him into believing that the bourgeois are the reason for his empty life. Fry his brain with drugs and alcohol so that they impair his faculties of reasoning. A similar fit of rage may lead to a different result, perhaps murder itself. The cause of murder, anger, remains constant in all circumstances. It's just that the actual act of murder yields substantially more temporal consequences. Yet, the eternal verdict remains the same, "guilty enough to go into the fiery hell" (Matt. 5:22).

Similarly, one who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery in his heart (Matt. 5:28). A willing woman, mental faculties altered by alcohol, and a little privacy comprise the fine line between imagination and actual adultery. The source of the sin remains the same. Many may not consider themselves to be adulterers or murderers. In fact, it would be hard for anyone to empirically prove it, as undoubtedly many of you have never had an affair or taken a life. Yet, when God examines the motives and intentions of your heart he finds a different verdict. While man attempts to justify himself as innocent, God finds him guilty.

Sin permeates mankind; it affects every aspect of their lives. Isaiah laments in 64:6 "For all of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment." His inability to please God in any area, even the "righteous" ones dumbfounded him. There exists no difference between his plight and ours. For instance, sin taints such benevolent acts as walking an old lady across the street. People may walk the lady across the street because they believe that they will get a tip for it. Perhaps, such an amiable action would impress their significant other. The "good feeling" they receive from performing commendable deeds may motivate others. Finally, deeply religious

individuals believe that these acts of charity expedite their salvation. Whatever the case, they have acted selfishly. They did not seek to honor the Lord as they did to honor themselves.

You should note the extreme danger of believing that good works please God. First of all, to believe that your works are righteous mocks God's standards of righteousness. Many people craft and create a mental idol of God in their own image. They become the ultimate standard of good and bad. Those who behave worse than them are bad, and the others who behave as good as them or better are good. Essentially, they exchange the great and awesome God, who abhors sin and will avenge injustice for a cosmic buddy who winks at sin and tolerates their shortcomings. They have exchanged the God of the Bible for a lie (Rom. 1:25).

If you believe that your righteous works can get you into heaven, you also mock the crucifixion of Christ. In the words of the apostle Paul, "I do not nullify the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly." Christ clearly pled in the Garden of Gethsemane that if there was any other way for mankind to be saved, then do not let Him die on the cross (Luke 22:42). Jesus did not die for the sake of sadistic self-indulgent pleasure. Rather, His death served as the only means of rescuing those who believe from the righteous retribution of God.

The Lake of Fire and the pits of Hell serve as a reminder of how much God abhors wickedness and rebellion. God will avenge the unrepentant who slaughter children and pilfer from the poor. He will also pour out his wrath upon all those who lust in their heart, murder in their mind, and make mental idols. The fires of Hell illumine the perfect righteousness of God. Punishment, which merely shakes a finger or

lightly slaps on the wrist, fails to express the contempt which the Lord has for sin. God crafted Hell out of His Holy Indigence. The Righteous Judge must punish the transgressions of man against the perfect precepts of God. Allowing sin to slide betrays God's character. Fortunately, not all will have to experience God's righteous wrath. The God of perfect righteousness is no less the God of perfect love. The severe wrath, which we warranted, was poured out upon Christ in our place. Instead of us having to endure the torments of Hell for eternity, the eternal God incarnate endured Hell on earth for six hours. “‘Do I have any pleasure in the death of the wicked,’ declares the Lord God, ‘Rather than that he should turn from his ways and live?’” (Ez. 18:23). God does not delight in your demise. He would rather have you return to Him in repentance and receive the death of His Son in your place. Yet, this will never happen until you come to terms with the depth and depravity of your own sin. Only when you truly realize that you need to be forgiven will you ask for forgiveness.

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