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The Gravity of Evil – Wisdom for Fighting the Fight

October 3, 2021

Sermon Text: 2 Cor 11

Scripture Reading: 2 Corinthians 11

Heb 5:14 But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.

This verse is right up at the top of my favorite scripture passages. The section actually reads like this:

Heb 5:11-14 About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. (12) For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, (13) for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of

righteousness, since he is a child. (14) But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.

Isn't this interesting? How do we generally think about what we call Christian maturity? The mature Christian? Someone who knows lots of Bible verses by memory? Or who can talk in detail about Bible doctrines, about the gospel, about eschatology and so on? And yet, check this out:

Heb 6:1 Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God,

See it? What we normally regard as the substance of being a mature Christian *is called here by the Apostle, the elementary doctrine of Christ.* Elementary school. Profound. Necessary. But elementary.

We must press on to real maturity, and that maturity is *having our powers of*

discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.
We must grow up, be wise, and be able to do this:

Heb 3:12-13 Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. (13) But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

Sin is deceitful. Our enemy is cunning. And the mature Christian is a person who is able to spot that deceit, to see that trickery which is designed to lead us away from Christ and produce a hard, unbelieving heart in us.

So, let’s do some growing up this morning. Let me show you some wisdom about the nature and tactics of our enemy. Here is the thesis:

There is a bent, a tendency, in our sinful flesh, to reject what is righteous and to embrace what is evil. To be drawn in by the apparent and exterior “beauty” of evil and reject what is truth and real beauty. It is this trait which still lingers in our fallen flesh that the enemy so typically uses as his point of attack. Evil comes to us dressed in beauty and if we are not

wise and able to discern good from evil, we will fall for it.

Let’s look at it. The pattern is laid out for us at length in Scripture.

Gen 3:1-6 Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden’?”

(2) And the woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, (3) but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.’”

(4) But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die. (5) For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” (6) So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate.

Paul had this very event in mind when he wrote this (We know that he was

thinking of the fall in Eden because, as you will see later, he says so:

2Co 11:14 And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light.

I do not know for sure what *the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field*...actually means. But I suspect that this craftiness included this “angel of light” business. Adam and Eve fell for it. Think about this very carefully. *Adam and Eve, in a state of innocence, in a condition which none of us have ever lived in, fell for Satan’s scheme.* They embraced what is evil and rejected God Himself. They accepted the serpent’s lies and rejected God’s life-giving truth.

This is sobering. Because if Adam and Even BEFORE the fall, chose to be drawn by what I call *the gravity of evil*, the PULL of evil as it comes disguised in outward beauty, then surely we had better get serious about this business of having our *powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.*

Let’s take another look at that key chapter in 2 Corinthians which we already read this morning:

2Co 11:1-7 I wish you would bear with

me in a little foolishness. Do bear with me! (2) For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ. (3) But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ.

(4) For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it readily enough. (5) Indeed, I consider that I am not in the least inferior to these super-apostles. (6) Even if I am unskilled in speaking, I am not so in knowledge; indeed, in every way we have made this plain to you in all things. (7) Or did I commit a sin in humbling myself so that you might be exalted, because I preached God's gospel to you free of charge?

Satan deceived Eve by his *cunning*. Craftiness. Deceitfulness. Skill, subtlety, trickery, wiliness. All intended to lead us away from Christ, away from righteousness, and to embrace instead unrighteousness and the devil’s servants.

The Corinthians had experienced great blessing through Paul. He was jealous

of them with a godly jealousy because, as he said, he *betrothed them* to Christ. He brought them the gospel and they believed and were saved.

And then what happened? They were led astray. Their feelings toward Paul and his gospel cooled. Why? Because *someone had come to them and preached another Jesus*. These servants of the snake bad-mouthed Paul. They criticized his oratory, his personal appearance and they attributed evil motives to him. They used his humility against him and they claimed that since he was the last Apostle to be called by Christ, he was inferior.

And what did the Corinthians do? They did what Adam and Eve did. They distanced themselves from the truth, from the good, and drifted toward the lie. There was just something about the lie, about this other Jesus and other gospel and these other apostles that called to them. And it happened fast. Really fast.

What was the reality? It was this:

2Co 11:13-15 For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. (14) And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. (15) So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of

righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds.

And look at this! In some ways this is the most remarkable and it leaves us just dumbfounded that anyone could be so stupid:

2Co 11:19-20 For you gladly bear with fools, being wise yourselves! (20) For you bear it if someone makes slaves of you, or devours you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or strikes you in the face.

Think very, very carefully. *There is something in our sinful flesh that is drawn to evil, power-broker types. And this fact should shake us at our foundations because:*

Isa 53:3 He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

This is not an isolated phenomenon in the Bible. Look at it again, this time in the Galatian churches. The gravity, the pull of evil -

Gal 1:6-7 I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— (7) not

that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ.

Gal 3:1 O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified.

Gal 4:12-20 Brothers, I entreat you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are. You did me no wrong. (13) You know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first, (14) and though my condition was a trial to you, you did not scorn or despise me, **but received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus.**

(15) What then has become of your blessedness? For I testify to you that, if possible, you would have gouged out your eyes and given them to me.

(16) Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth?

(17) They make much of you, but for no good purpose. They want to shut you out, that you may make much of them.

(18) It is always good to be made much of for a good purpose, and not only when I am present with you, (19) my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you! (20) I wish I could be

present with you now and change my tone, for I am perplexed about you.

Think about what Satan's emissaries had done in those churches after Paul had left. Look at their methods and goals.

- They were *bewitched*. As if a spell had been cast over them.
- It happened *quickly*. Overnight.
- They were led away from not only Paul, but from Christ.
- They had loved Paul and his gospel. They received him as an angel of God.
- But now that fervor, that love, that blessedness had evaporated.
- The true apostle was now regarded by them as the enemy, and the enemy was regarded as friend!!
- The method of evil was to "make much of" the target. To flatter them. The goal was to cause them to reject the truth, to reject Paul, to reject Christ, and to worship their master...the devil.
- The whole thing was *perplexing*. How did it happen and how did it happen so fast??

You have seen this very thing first hand. People who embrace Christ with fervor, who love you and walk with you in Christ, and then, overnight, the spell

is cast. They are bewitched. Why? *Because they were not wise and trained to discern evil from good. They heard the serpent in the tree and they were beguiled.*

We must be on guard for ourselves! We must be wise as serpents and innocent as doves when it comes to this business. We must be wise to the enemy's tactics and we must be aware that our sinful flesh is our Achilles heel where the enemy will always attack.

“Don’t listen to Paul. Look at him. He is unimpressive. His message is so radical and costly. Follow us. Here is real truth. You don’t need to have all this trouble that Paul’s way brings.”

Mat 13:36-43 Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples came to him, saying, “Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.” (37) He answered, “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. (38) The field is the world, and the good seed is the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, (39) and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. (40) Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. (41) The Son of Man will send his angels, and they

will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, (42) and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (43) Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.

Notice in particular:

(38) The field is the world, and the good seed is the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, (39) and the enemy who sowed them is the devil.

The devil is always, always, always at work. He sows his evil seed. Who had beguiled the Corinthians and the Galatians? The devil. And he was able to do it because they were foolish. They were not trained to distinguish good from evil. They fell for it. They embraced what was evil and rejected what was truth. They received the wicked ones gladly. They received another Jesus and another gospel and another spirit. Their fervent love for Paul was cooled. O foolish, foolish, foolish Christians!

You can be sure of it. The devil is going to show up. He is going to come to your church, if it is a real church. And he is going to be very impressive. Very

“holy.” Very “saintly” and “wise.” He is going to flatter you. And then he is going to begin to sow the seeds of lies and doubts in your thinking.

“Indeed, has God said...”

He will assault God’s real servants to alienate you from them. We have seen this very tactic so often in the methods of wicked people who abuse their spouse. They work to isolate them and alienate them from what is good and from people who speak truth.

You see the thing in Absalom:

2Sa 15:1-6 After this Absalom got himself a chariot and horses, and fifty men to run before him. (2) And Absalom used to rise early and stand beside the way of the gate. And when any man had a dispute to come before the king for judgment, Absalom would call to him and say, “From what city are you?” And when he said, “Your servant is of such and such a tribe in Israel,” (3) Absalom would say to him, “See, your claims are good and right, but there is no man designated by the king to hear you.” (4) Then Absalom would say, “Oh that I were judge in the land! Then every man with a dispute or cause might come to me, and I would give him justice.” (5) And whenever a man came near to pay homage to him, he would put out his hand and take hold of

him and kiss him. (6) Thus Absalom did to all of Israel who came to the king for judgment. So Absalom stole the hearts of the men of Israel.

That is the enemy. Expect it to come your way. Working to steal your heart away from Christ, from the truth of the gospel, from Christ’s people. When Christ gives us a new heart, He gives us His Spirit and that means we have the ability to hear and recognize Christ. Our flesh will be used by the devil to tempt us to listen to him, to embrace him, to believe him...be aware of this. Beware of it. Be wise and grow in your ability to discern good from evil, Christ from the enemy. Christ’s people from the enemy’s people.

The Other Side – Recognizing the Good

Finally, let me show you one more thing that is extremely important and it is also extremely easy to miss. We are not only to be trained by constant practice (in God’s Word) to discern evil, *but to distinguish good from evil.* Let me explain. It sounds like the same thing, but it is not.

If we are going to be wise to evil, then it is necessary that we are wise to what is good. Understand? How can you identify darkness if you have no concept of light?

Notice what the author of Hebrews is speaking of there in chapter 5 and 6. *He wants to teach them more about good things. About true things. About Christ as high priest. About the order of Melchizedek.* But he cannot because they lack the capability not only of identifying evil, but of identifying what is good!

And here is the point. It is not enough to know about wickedness and evil and sin. It is not enough to know the details of various heresies and false gospels. *We also must be trained in righteousness, in goodness, in holiness, in sound doctrine and truth. We must be able to recognize what is good and to identify those who are the real and righteous servants of Christ. Do you see?*

That is to say, if all we end up doing is spotting this evil and that evil and this heresy and that false teaching, if all we do is withdraw deeper and deeper into isolation so that we cannot be touched (supposedly) by any evil person or lie, *then we are going to isolate and divorce ourselves from that which is good and godly and holy and right. We are going to isolate ourselves from Christ and from Christ's real people. Do you see? Does that make sense?*

Many of you listening have been deeply hurt, damaged, abused, betrayed,

rejected...and on and on the list could go...by evil people. By people who have claimed to be servants of Christ. And it is excellent that you have grown wise to the tactics of such servants of the devil.

However, we must also learn to grow wise in regard to goodness, to truth, to righteousness, to love – that is to say, to Christ. So that we recognize Him, hear Him, so we recognize His people. Because if we fail here, then what we are going to do is – well, we are going to be bewitched and deceived through, shall we say, a sneaky, cunning “back door entrance” of the devil. If he cannot keep us ignorant of evil, then he will keep us blind to goodness. Either way, he wins.

The churches today are in a mess. Counterfeit Christians abound. False shepherds fill so many pulpits. But Christ always has His people. He always has His true pastors and churches. It is vital that we believe this and that we grow wiser and wiser in our ability to discern the good as well as the evil.

This discernment requires the Spirit of God in us. It requires a regenerate heart. It requires ears to hear and eyes to see not only the false shepherd, but the true Shepherd and His true flock.

