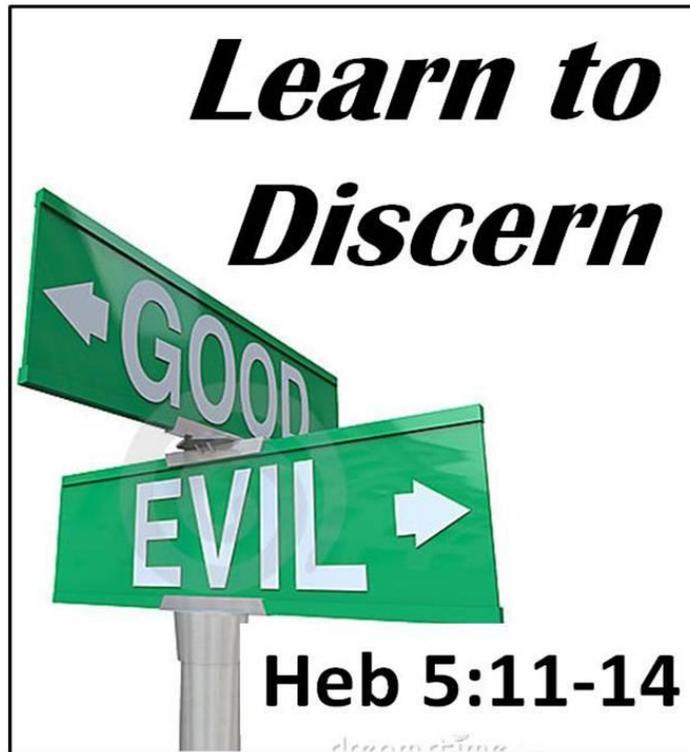


Basic Training Bible Ministries

Learn to Discern

The Necessity and Means of Sharpened Spiritual Faculties



“... of whom we have much to say, and hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.”

Rocky Mountain Bible Conference

25-27 May, 2012

Learn to Discern

The Necessity and Means of Sharpened Spiritual Faculties

I. Spiritual Growth and Moral Clarity—Heb 5:11–12

“Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; who put darkness for light, and light for darkness; who put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter.” Isa 5:20

Introduction:

1. In this chapter of Isaiah seven “woes” are pronounced against an apostate nation that has lost its spiritual and moral compass—rejecting God’s truth.
2. This text parallels other great “woe” passages such as Habakkuk 2; Matthew 23 and Luke 6 and 11.
3. These pronouncements are more than literary flourishes. When God declares “woe” on a people, it is an announcement of certain coming doom under the wrath of God. This is illustrated by the “three woes” of Rev 8:13, 9:12, 11:14 and 12:12.
4. The state of spiritual blindness that results from rejection of God’s Word brings a nation (much like America today) to champion as “good” causes those things which are absolute evils.
5. The spiritual decline of a nation begins with apathy and indifference among the people of God, therefore *“judgment ... begin[s] at the house of God”* (1Pe 4:17).

A. Hebrews 5:11–6:1

“... of whom we have much to say, and hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil. Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on to perfection, not laying aside the foundation of repentance from dead works and the faith toward God ...” Heb 5:14–6:1

The authorship of this amazing book will always be debated. According to C.I. Scofield, *“We undoubtedly have here the method of Paul’s synagogue addresses.”* This is an intriguing consideration. The author of Hebrews is exhorting the Jewish-Christians of his generation to stop wavering in the face of persecutions, to beware of reverting back into Judaism, and to get serious about living a dynamic life of faith by “pressing on to maturity” (Heb 6:1). This epistle was written shortly before the outpouring of wrath on Israel in 70-73 A.D. It is highly likely that many who read this letter suffered and died under the *“fiery indignation”* (Heb 10:27) that engulfed Israel during that time. Five major points are made:

1. Their Spiritual Reversion—Heb 5:11
 “*Of whom*” refers to Jesus Christ in His High-priestly role (Heb 5:5–10). The difficulty facing the author to further instruct them in this glorious topic is their spiritual sluggishness. The phrase “*you have become*” indicates a state contrary to what they once were, and for which they bear the blame. In other words, they had fallen “*short of the grace of God*” (Gal 5:4; Heb 12:15).

2. Their Failed Potential—Heb 5:12
 “*By this time*” suggests that they have had ample time to arrive at a level of spiritual maturity. The word “*ought*” implies that they had failed a spiritual obligation, that is, to become “*teachers*” by word and example (cf. 1Th 1:6–8). By contrast, they have reverted to a condition of spiritual infancy, and required “*bottle-feeding*” on basic doctrines. Reversion is a condition in which a believer, having reached a degree of growth, “*turns back*” (Heb 10:38) or retreats to a condition of a spiritual baby (1Co 3:1–2).

3. Diet-Based Development—Heb 5:13–14a
 It is often said “*you are what you eat.*” Nowhere is this truer than in regard to spiritual growth. Milk makes babies, meat makes mature believers. One of the great tragedies of our time is the failure of pastors to feed their congregations on sound doctrine. Believers who are fed only “*milk*” are “*unskilled in the word of righteousness.*” The word implied ignorance, inexperience, and therefore ineptness. “*He is a babe*” based on his spiritual diet. By contrast, mature believers feed on “*solid food*” or “*the deep things of God*” (1Co 2:10). It is the ministry of the Holy Spirit to lead each and every believer in the pursuit of an ever deeper understanding of God’s truth (Joh 14:26, 15:26, 16:13). Any believer who fails to become a “*skilled workman*” in the Word of God (2Ti 2:15) does so by failing to follow the leading of the Spirit, and is therefore carnal (1Co 3:1). It is worth noting that true learning in the Word of God implies practical application. The word “*use*” implies a fit condition resulting from consistent “*exercise,*” from which we get the word gymnasium. The point is that spiritual fitness is the result of consistent spiritual exercise.

4. The Crucial Necessity—Heb 5:14b
 The aim of spiritual growth is triumphant Christ-like living. Spiritual transformation moves one away from “*conformity to the world*” and ever closer to reflecting the “*image of Christ*” (cf. Rom 8:29, 12:1–2). Such transformation is not possible apart from developing the “*senses,*” or spiritual perceptive faculties, to be able to “*discern ... good and evil.*” The word “*discern*” implies a skill of differentiating or distinguishing between two things that are not easily separated. Here we get our first critical factor regarding the biblical definition of evil. Evil has the appearance of good but is defective and destructive. Evil deceives the shallow and superficial but never the spiritually astute, who “*discerns all things*” (1Co 2:15). When Solomon requested wisdom from God, he defined it as the ability to discern good and evil (cf. 1Ki 3:9, 28; 2Ch 1:10–12). When the Bible speaks of wisdom, the skill of discernment between good and evil is always in view. We will see more on this in the next section.

5. Triumphant Surrender—Heb 6:1

Failure to grow is due to active resistance to the indwelling Spirit of God and His urging to “*study to show [yourself] approved to God*” (2Ti 2:15–KJV). On the contrary, a level of spiritual maturity results from willing surrender to His leading. An accurate rendering of Rom 8:14 reads, “*For as many as are [being] led by the Spirit of God, these are the [mature] sons of God.*” The issue is not regeneration, as most translations of the passage imply, but rather sanctification and maturity. The exhortation to “*let us go on to perfection*” is an exhortation to be carried on to maturity by the Holy Spirit. This goal is attained by an active “*leaving*” of basic teachings, combined with a passive submission to being led or “*carried on*” by the Spirit of God. This same idea is found in the “*yielding*” of Rom 6:13, 16, 19 or the “*presenting*” of oneself to God in Rom 12:1—both passages using the same word in the original language. No believer who submits to the Spirit’s leading will fail to have a hunger for the Word of God resulting in evident spiritual growth due to increasing ability to discern between good and evil. The formula would look like this:

consistent study of sound doctrine
+ skillful daily discernment of good as opposed to evil
= steady increase of spiritual maturity

Summary:

1. The critical need for every believer is to avoid deception by holding to truth. Note that the phrase “*in the word of righteousness*” implies practical application.
2. Since evil is the ultimate deception, it is made to appear as though it is good. Consider 2Co 11:3 in light of Paul’s dissertation on true vs. false apostles as tools of Satan’s deception of the church (2Co 10:12–11:15).
3. All evil involves sin, but evil is a much broader and deeper concept. Evil is the deception which makes the sin appear as something good and right.
4. Evil takes something that is harmful, injurious, and malignant, and makes it look desirable, agreeable, and profitable.
5. Tyranny, genocide, adultery, addiction—these are all sinful. However, they are only pursued and promoted by people who have come to see them as good.
6. When one calls what is evil good, and what is good evil (Isa 5:20) he/she is the twisted product of his/her own refusal to seek truth, and is in the devil’s grip.
7. Corrupt politicians and preachers are masters in the use of evil. By deception, they hide schemes for self promotion under the guise of “*serving the people,*” and plans for tyranny behind facades of freedom. Slavery under socialism/Marxism/communism always advances behind the banner of “*liberation,*” and generations of people—unable to discern good from evil—participate in their own enslavement. This is where America finds itself today!

II. Back to the Garden and the Tree—Gen 3:1–13

“But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ.” 2Co 11:3

Introduction:

1. The danger of deception regarding good and evil is the same today as it was in the Garden. Satan makes what God has called bad look good.
2. The source of this deception is the same today as then—that of the devil.
3. The effect of such deception is the corruption and distortion of one’s perceptive capacities in regard to good and evil.
4. It is the nature of truth that it is simple, therefore pure or unadulterated.
5. In the ancient world, the words for “simplicity” and “purity” were seen as almost synonymous. Therefore simplicity in Christ implies a purity from all that is evil.

A. The Issue of Good and Evil in the Garden—Gen 3:1–13

1. The story of Adam and Eve is probably the best known, and least understood, story in the Bible. There are many perversions of teaching that begin right here. I have heard pastors teach that the fruit of the tree represented sexual intercourse. This is a bizarre interpretation in light of Gen 1:28 and 2:24, where the union of the man and woman is blessed by God! Others have used a twisted view of the story to blame Eve (and by association, all women) for all the ills of the world. However, a right understanding of this passage is crucial to each of us—every day of our lives.
2. In the Garden, there was one prohibition: the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The Word of God at this point was “be fruitful and multiply... tend the garden ... eat from every tree ... do not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” Very simple and straightforward instructions. The good involves all that God approved, and the evil in the one thing He prohibited. At this point, Adam and Eve knew only good. They could not “know” evil because they had never experienced it. God gave Adam the prohibition regarding the tree prior to making Eve (Gen 2:15–22). It was presumably part of Adam’s headship and leadership to instruct his wife regarding the prohibition. Since Paul tells us that “*Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression*” (1Ti 2:14), we may conclude that Adam did not instruct Eve very well. Further, her addition to God’s prohibition, “*nor shall you touch it, lest you die*” (Gen 3:3), indicates some confusion on her part.
3. Satan’s goal in the Garden was simply this, to take what God declared evil (i.e., that which was contrary to His will and character) and make it appear “good.” It is critical to the understanding of evil to note that Satan used what was in itself “good” (i.e., the tree, cf. Gen 1:31), in order to make what was evil (disobedience to the plan of God; sin) appear good. His deception began by bringing God’s goodness into question (Gen 3:1). The implication is that God is keeping something good from you. Having planted the doubt, he then directly contradicts God’s Word, and goes on to present the consequences of eating from the tree in what appears to be a good light, “*you will be like God, knowing good and evil.*” What he fails to say is that—unlike God—they would then be slaves of evil, having been overcome by it (cf. Rom 12:21, which we will study later). Satan could never have pulled this off on Adam, which is why he chose the woman. As the woman observed the tree, she took note that it was, “*good for food ... pleasant to the eyes ...*

desirable to make one wise,” and she ate. At that very moment, Eve died spiritually, just as God had warned (Gen 2:17). But the pernicious nature of evil always brings the desire to draw others into it (cf. Rom 1:32), so *“she also gave to her husband with her, and he ate.”*

4. If, as Paul tells us, Adam was not deceived, why did he then follow Eve in her act of rebellion against God? Since he was “with her” the whole time, why did he not intervene to stop her? We may never be able to answer the second of these questions, but I think there is a fairly obvious answer to the first one. The devil knew that he could not deceive Adam, so he used the woman. He also rightly concluded that if he got the woman, he would also get the man. In essence, Adam followed Eve so that he could keep Eve. Adam was willing to sacrifice everything for the sake of his wife—even his relationship with God. This brings us to a principle that needs to be clearly stated. Not all who enter into evil do so by deception. For some, it is a willful choice—made in the full light of understanding—for the sake of what they hope to gain. And as with Adam and Eve, the guilt which God assigns for the act is not the same. It is this which makes the sin of Adam the grounds for all human misery, and not the sin of Eve (Rom 5:12–21). It is also worth noticing that the full consequence of the act did not fall upon them until after Adam had eaten the fruit (Gen 3:7). There is in this, at the very least, a suggestion that since they were *“one flesh”* (Gen 2:24), and Adam was the spiritual head (1Co 11:3; 1Ti 2:13) the act of rebellion was not considered complete until he partook of the fruit.
5. What needs to be seen here is that the attraction for Eve was wisdom. The tree was *“desirable to make one wise.”* In defining evil, it is also necessary to define wisdom. It was Eve’s deception that saw the tree as a path to wisdom. God did not say it would make them wise, but that it would give *“the knowledge of good and evil.”* Knowledge here is used in the sense of skill or experience. As Paul says in Rom 16:19, *“I want you to be wise in what is good, and simple concerning evil.”*

B. Evil Distinguished from God and His Wisdom—Jam 1:13–15, Jam 3:15–18

1. The incident in the Garden brings up the question of the relation of evil to God, as well as its relation to wisdom. In the book of James, both questions are answered. First (Jam 1:13–15), James declares that God is diametrically opposed to evil in His very nature. The devil’s lie, *“you will be like God, knowing good and evil”* (Gen 3:5) is a very dangerous half-truth. God in His omniscience knows evil, but knows it as that which is opposed to His very essence. He does not know evil by participating in it, which is the only way Adam and Eve (and mankind) can know it. There is nothing in evil which can tempt God, and He Himself cannot tempt anyone to evil. As Jesus—the incarnate God—said, *“... the ruler of this world is coming, and he has nothing in Me”* (Joh 14:30). Just as darkness is the opposite of light, so evil is the opposite of God. What then of evil as a form of wisdom?
2. In James 3:15–18 we have two distinct forms of wisdom. There is the wisdom *“from above,”* that is, of divine origin. It reflects the nature of God in that it is *“pure ... peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and*

without hypocrisy” (Jam 3:17). In other words, such wisdom originates in the nature of God and reflects the character of Jesus Christ, who is the visible image of God (Col 1:15; Heb 1:3). In opposition to this is the wisdom of evil, which is “*earthly, sensual, demonic,*” and is evidenced in “*bitter envy and self-seeking*” (Jam 3:13). In their original state in the Garden, Adam and Eve possessed the divine wisdom, having no knowledge or experience of evil. By acting independently, they violated God’s only prohibition on them and entered into the serpentine “wisdom” of evil. Immediately, all the effects of evil were at work in them, including guilt, fear, shame, guile, deception, divisiveness, etc. They now “knew” evil from the inside, but—unlike God—they had no power to resist it or conquer its hold on them. The promise of the “seed of the woman” (Gen 3:15) anticipated the genius of God, who by entering into the realm of evil, would conquer it by becoming the victim of it. Jesus entered the house of the “*strong man*” (Mat 12:29) and plundered it by setting the devil’s captives free.

Summary:

1. The story of the fall of man into sin illustrates the value God places on freedom. Evil exists only because God’s creatures (Satan, then man) possessed the power to act independently of His will and expressed command. To argue otherwise is to make God the ultimate author of evil, a position that blatantly denies the plain statements of the Bible.
2. It is critical to see evil not only in relation to God and wisdom, but also to good. The forbidden tree was not evil in itself. It was included in all created things that God declared to be “*very good*” (Gen 1:31). There was nothing inherent in the tree or its fruit that was evil. In fact, it was indeed “*good for food*” and “*pleasant to the eyes*” (Gen 3:6). Thus, it was designated by God, not the “tree of good and evil,” but rather “*the tree of the knowledge of good and evil*” (Gen 2:9, 17). That experiential knowledge came, not from some power in the tree, but from the consequence of disobedience. God could have used any tree—or any other act—as a test for human freedom.
3. In understanding the above, another truth begins to emerge. Evil consists not only in sinful decisions and actions, but also in the abuse of things that are inherently good when they are used outside the boundaries set by God. A perfect example is the use of sex. Within the boundaries of marriage set by God, it is invented and blessed by God for both procreation and pleasure. However, used outside His intended bounds, sex becomes a curse—bringing broken hearts, broken homes, misery, despair, degeneracy, and even murder.
4. Evil in its most deceptive form then is evil which comes in the guise of good. The reason it takes spiritual discernment to detect and avoid evil is because of its inherent satanic ability to camouflage itself in the guise of good. While it is easy to see the evils of tyranny, slavery, genocide, etc., it must be noted that in every case where entire nations have been swept up in these atrocities, the people chose to have those disasters brought upon them because the leaders offered “good things” that were divorced from the fear of God, and the love of His Word.

5. Every attempt in history to establish a nation, empire, or kingdom on “good principles” **apart from the foundation of God’s Word** has failed—and is doomed to fail—because mankind, having the ability to envision a world of peace, justice, and prosperity, does not have the power to produce what it seeks. Only by faith in the God of the Bible, and submission to His Word, can His blessings be acquired (Deu 28:1–14)!

III. The High Cost of Evil in a Generation—Deu 1:29–40, 28:1–14, 30:15–20; Jdg 2:1–23, 21:25

Introduction:

One of the fundamental principles at work in this world is that we reap what we sow (Deu 30:15–20; Gal 6:7–9). When the majority in any nation consistently makes evil choices, that nation as a whole will reap the consequences of its own evil. This is the guaranteed outcome of any generation which refuses to identify evil for what it is. In our own generation, rationalism and relativism have produced political correctness, which acts as a tolerant attitude, but which—in fact—is intolerant of any identification of evil. The only evil recognized by the “politically correct” crowd is the intolerance of evil. Since God’s grace always precedes His wrath, time is given for national awakening and repentance, apart from which a generation will face a time of “*reap[ing] the whirlwind,*” as in the time of Hosea (Hos 8:1–14). The following are some historical examples:

A. The Rebellion at Kadesh—Deu 1:29–40

Here Moses recounts the rebellion of Israel in response to the evil report of the ten spies as recorded in Num 13:32 (cf. KJV “*evil report*”). Because of this, the entire adult generation—with the exception of Joshua and Caleb—gave in to unbelief, and would not go into the “good land” God had promised. As a result, God designated them an “*evil congregation*” and cursed them to wander 40 years, until all that generation died. According to 1Co 10:5, “*their bodies were scattered in the wilderness.*” The point is that ten men led an entire generation into oblivion by giving in to evil.

B. The Promise of Blessing for Obedience—Deu 28:1–14

Now, the next generation is preparing to enter into the land. Moses reminds them, in contrast to the evil of their father’s generation, of the blessings that will be poured out on them for obedience to God’s Word. The word “*blessed*” used repeatedly in this passage is interesting. It comes from the root *barak* which means “to kneel, to praise.” The indication is of one who responds to the blessings and goodness of God with praise and adoration. Moses makes it clear that God’s blessing is dependant on their faith and obedience.

Just as Adam and Eve suffered the consequences of their evil decisions, even so the people of God throughout history are promised that obedience to God—based on trust in Him—will result in His blessing. Just as cursing speaks of the divine response to evil, so blessing is His response to choosing the good. Once again, as in the Garden, good and

evil are defined—not by outward appearance—but by what God has commanded or prohibited. Only faith can see beyond outward appearance to discern the evil that is hidden behind a “good appearance,” or the good that may be obscured by what appears to be evil.

To the ten spies who caused the hearts of their generation to melt in fear and unbelief, the good of the land was obscured by the evil appearance of the giants (review Num 13:26–33). On the other hand, to Joshua and Caleb who wholly trusted the Lord, the appearance of evil (the giants) was seen as an opportunity to trust God to lead them to victory and give them all the good things and blessings of the land. Perspective, based on spiritual maturity, led to entirely opposite conclusions. Joshua and Caleb had maturity, therefore could discern between good and evil. The rest of their generation, lacking maturity and unable by faith to claim the good, ended their days suffering evil for the evil of their decisions.

C. Israel’s “Dark Ages”—Jdg 2:1–23

The context of this amazing chapter is the repeated refrain of chapter one, “*did not drive out,*” (Jdg 1:27) referring to their failure to fully claim the land. Failure and defeat in the face of the inhabitants of Canaan was always an evidence of lack of faith (Deu 7:16–24). Therefore, we have the amazing appearance of the “Angel of Jehovah” (a Christophany—an appearance of Jesus Christ in the Old Testament) in the second chapter. The chapter can be divided into three major sections:

1. The Prophetic Rebuke of the Angel of Jehovah—Jdg 2:1–6

The Angel of Jehovah reviews God’s promises and warnings from the past (cf. Exo 23:33; Num 33:55; Deu 7:16; Jos 23:1–16)) and rebukes Israel for their wavering faith and obedience even during the lifetime of Joshua. To tell where a man or a generation will be in the future, it is only necessary to see the trend or aim of the present. Life and history are dynamic. They do not remain in one place, but are always heading toward either good or evil. One of the simplest of truths—yet the hardest to convince men of—is that those who aim at evil will reap evil, and the reaping is always far greater than the sowing. Though Israel weeps and sacrifices (Jdg 2:4–5), their devotion is short-lived. The trend is too firmly set.

2. The Death of Joshua and the Decline of the Nation—Jdg 2:7–15

The key contrast here is found in the generation “*who had seen all the works of the Lord*” (Jdg 2:7) as opposed to “*another generation ... who did not know the Lord*” and who “*did evil in the sight of the Lord*” (Jdg 2:10–11). When we choose the way of evil, God in His justice allows us to eat the fruit of evil. Because they “*forsook the Lord*” and “*provoked the Lord*” (Jdg 2:12–13), His justice came into play. Therefore, we read that “*the hand of the Lord was against them for calamity*” (Jdg 2:15). The word translated “*calamity*” is *ra*, meaning “affliction, adversity, or evil.” The principle here is that moral/spiritual evil (that which involves the rebellious will of

man against God) will inevitably reap natural evils, that is, conditions of suffering in which the wrath of God is expressed. It must be stated that the holy nature of God can only be expressed toward moral or spiritual evil in antipathy, antagonism, and wrath. Otherwise, God would not be good. The evils that came upon the nation during the times of the judges were not unheralded. All these things happened “*as the Lord had said*” (Jdg 2:15b) through Moses long ago (Deu 28:15–29).

3. The Role of the Judges as Israel’s Deliverers—Jdg 2:16–23

In spite of the continued rebellion of the nation, God remained faithful to His Word. Where there was genuine repentance among the people, He responded by raising up judges among them (Jdg 2:16–19). It is from this reference that the title of the book is found. The work of the judge was both to deliver them, and to convict and correct them, “*yet they would not listen to their judges*” (Jdg 1:17a).

The time of the judges was Israel’s “dark ages,” a time of evil unleashed upon a nation by the evil that came from within them. As soon as the judge was dead, reversionism set in (Jdg 2:19). Israel repeatedly chose the evil path, and suffered the evil results. Finally, God declared that He would not drive out their enemies, but would instead use them to test the nation (Jdg 2:22). In essence, the Canaanite tribes became a test of Israel’s choice of good or evil. It is worth remembering that it was during the time of judges that the events of the book of Ruth occurred (Rut 1:1). In this beautiful story, we see God’s abiding faithfulness to those who—even in the most dark and difficult of times—gained the spiritual maturity to discern good and evil, and choose the good. In reality, Boaz was the local judge for Bethlehem at that time, and his wise and faithful influence brought blessing on all who lived there. Would that we might have a similar impact in our time!

4. A Generation of Evil and Anarchy—Jdg 21:25

The summary statement given here reveals that evil is anarchy against God. To say that “*everyone did what was right in his own eyes*” is to say that what God had declared to be right was scorned. One phrase repeated throughout the book of Judges is that “*Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord.*” The ultimate evil—whether among men or angels—is to seek to raise oneself into the role of God (Isa 14:13–15; Gen 3:5). When an individual acts with disregard for all higher authority (Rom 13:1–7), he has in fact rebelled against God, the Author of all authority. When this becomes the prevailing attitude in a nation, conditions of anarchy prevail. Men live for the sole purpose of gratifying their own increasingly degenerate cravings. Positions of power and authority are corrupted; law and order cease to exist. America today is perilously close to such a time, and we need—as never before—men and women who will stand as honorable judges, discerning good and evil. Yet such people will not arise apart from the faithful teaching of God’s Word in our churches, resulting in the spiritual maturity of believers. As never before, we need pastors who are bold spiritual warriors who will not only teach, but faithfully exemplify true spiritual maturity. May

God raise up a spiritually mature remnant of men and women in America's time of need.

Summary:

1. History is filled with evidence of the relationship between the decisions and the destinies of peoples and nations.
2. The fact that decisions have consequences is repeatedly demonstrated in life as well as in historical records.
3. The nature of God is so bound up in the "laws of nature" that evil actions bring about corresponding evil consequences.
4. The book of Judges is a classic history of seven cycles of evil, oppression, repentance, and deliverance.
5. The ultimate evil is rejection and defiance of God, and the opposite good is that of faith and submission to His Word and will.

IV. How Evil Infiltrates the Church—Mat 7:15–27, 12:33–39; 2Co 11:13–15

Introduction:

Unfortunately, Christians often tend to be the most naïve and gullible of people. They are easily deceived by shallow, self-serving leaders, who know how to appeal to the simple and undiscerning (Rom 16:17–18). Therefore, in the person of the spiritual leader, evil infiltrates into the churches, and in time permeates them. This is sadly the condition of far too many churches in America. When either biblical inaccuracy or "political correctness" enters into the pulpit, all spiritual truth departs. Every message, every teaching, will be tainted by the evils of our corrupt and degenerate age. The message is then designed for popular appeal rather than spiritual penetration resulting in transformation. Apart from a discernment born out of spiritual growth and maturity, the infiltration of evil is not even noticed—much less resisted. The outcome is the gradual change from Christ-centered, mission-minded Philadelphian churches to the man-centered, materialistic-minded church of today.

A. Wolves in Sheep's Clothing—Mat 7:15–27

Jesus' warning concerning false prophets comes in the context of the narrow gate versus the broad way. In defining the "*broad ... way that leads to destruction*" (Mat 7:13), He speaks of the false prophet. Three main points are made by our Lord regarding these men, or women, as the case may be:

1. Deception of False Prophets—Mat 7:15

Jesus warns of their methods of deception. Outwardly adopting the desired appearance of the sheep, they look, talk, and act like a believer in Jesus Christ. In fact—in their craftiness—they often look better than the average child of God, beset with trials and struggling with life. They are smooth, polished, and flattering to the ear. Peter says of them, "*they speak great swelling words of emptiness*" (2Pe 2:18) so as to deceive. Their

inward condition is precisely the opposite. As “*ravenous wolves*” they have one goal, and that is to divide and devour the flock. On his last visit with the elders from Ephesus, the Apostle Paul warned of this same danger:

“For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves.” Act 20:29–30

2. The Discernment of False Prophets—Mat 7:16–20

Today, these verses are often taken out of context, to be used as a “test” of regeneration. In other words, if you do not produce the fruit which some self-appointed “fruit inspector” requires, you must not be born again. Properly understood, the text is giving believers the means of discerning false teachers. Instead of grapes or figs, they produce thorns and thistles. Jesus points all the way back to the curse of the fall in Gen 3:18. The ground that is cursed due to sin will bring forth “*thorns and thistles.*”

The author of the book of Hebrews picks up on this imagery, speaking of the works of the flesh as “*thorns and briars*” as evidence of the curse, “*whose end is to be burned*” (Heb 6:8). The point Jesus is making is that no matter how deceptive or polished the unsaved false teacher may be, he can only bring forth out of his nature. His words may be pleasing, but there is no power of the indwelling Spirit of God to produce a transformed life. A simple example is the preacher who harangues people to give in a sacrificial spirit, yet lives in luxury from those offerings which are given. There is something suspect about religious leaders who demand one thing of their followers, yet by their every action deny that very requirement of themselves. “By their fruits, you shall know them” (Mat 7:16). In essence Jesus is saying, “Don’t just hear their words, see if they live by the message they preach.” And while it is true that every genuine minister of God’s Word struggles with personal frailty and faults, there must be evidence of a persistent striving “*upward*” toward the high calling of the ministry, as illustrated by Paul (Phi 3:7–14).

3. The Doom of the False Teachers—Mat 7:21–27

In the first portion of this section (vv. 21–23) Jesus declares the reason for their doom. Whatever boast they make of great accomplishments in Jesus’ name, He will one day confront them with the reality, “*I never knew you*” (Mat 7:23). This could never be said of a believer. This is an unsaved, unregenerate pretender who entered upon the chosen path of deceiving and defrauding God’s people for personal gain. His religious charade will be exposed by the Lord Jesus Christ at the Great White Throne Judgment (Rev 20:11–14). The basis of eternal condemnation is always the same: failure to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ (Joh 3:16–21).

Then in vv. 24–27 Jesus gives a pictorial illustration of their doom. In this figure, every man is building a house, which is his life. Those who choose to build on

hearing and obeying the words of Christ have built on a certain and sure foundation for eternity. When the storm came (a figure of eternal judgment), their house stood firm. On the other hand, we find those who build a house, however fine it may be, on sand. These are equivalent to those of whom Jesus said, *“I never knew you.”* In the end, the storm and flood bring about the fall of their house, *“and great was its fall.”* The critical issue then is not the size, beauty, materials, or contents of the house. In the final analysis, the crucial thing is on what foundation it was built. Better by far a small and simple home on a solid foundation, than a mansion on sinking sand. It is all about the foundation, and as Paul reminds us, *“no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ”* (1Co 3:11). Apart from the foundation of faith in Him, every life is doomed to eternal judgment (Heb 9:27).

B. Evil Root and Evil Fruit—Mat 12:22–45

This is a long section and I will not deal with it in detail. However, it is worth pointing out how Jesus again and again confronted and unmasked the evil religious leaders of His time. It is clear that discernment of good and evil is impossible apart from spiritual growth and maturity. And it is certain that spiritual birth must come before these. You cannot grow spiritually until you are born again. In confronting the diabolical evil of the Pharisees, Jesus shows that they *“call evil good and good evil”* (Isa 5:20). Even the prophet Isaiah gives the reason for such monumental confusion, *“because they have rejected the law of the Lord of hosts, and despised the word of the Holy One of Israel”* (Isa 5:24b). Here the Pharisees are in the very presence of the Holy One of Israel, yet they ascribe His miraculous divine powers to the devil.

For the sake of those who “have ears to hear,” Jesus counters by declaring that a house divided cannot stand, therefore He could not serve Satan if He casts out Satan. Rather, He has come to plunder the *“strong man’s house”* (the devil’s). He then indicts the Pharisees of the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (Mat 12:31–32), in that they resist the convicting ministry of the Spirit and refuse to believe (cf., Joh 16:7–11). He attributes this evil to their unregenerate condition (Mat 12:33–37), and once again uses the picture of the good tree versus the evil tree. He then concludes His teaching by revealing that preoccupation with signs and wonders is the mark of *“an evil and adulterous generation”* (Mat 12:39). Such a generation is doomed to judgment (Mat 12:40–42).

Finally, in Mat 12:43–45, He illustrates, again with the figure of the house, the danger of religious or moral reform without regeneration by faith. One may by great effort “clean up his act” and present what appears to be a model life. However, having evicted one demon, without filling the vacancy of his *“house”* by the indwelling of God’s Spirit, he is doomed to an end that is worse than the beginning. Peter makes the same point regarding false teachers in 2Pe 2:20, *“the latter end is worse for them than the beginning.”*

C. The Spirit of Antichrist—2Co 11:13-15; 1Jo.2:18–23

Evil enters into the church in the guise of good. Naïve and immature believers will always be deceived by it. In Paul’s day, the false apostles seemed more appealing to the Corinthians than did Paul—the man chosen by God. We find Paul in the Corinthian epistles constantly forced to defend himself and his calling to this carnal congregation. Here (2Co 11:13–15), he says that false apostles “*transform themselves into apostles of Christ*” by the same power that “*Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light.*” Note that in both cases the transformation comes from themselves—not the power of God. It is nothing more than a crafty imitation designed to deceive the unwary. So it is with false pastors in our own age. It is crucial to bear in mind that the ultimate target of the false teacher is not the unsaved, but the gullible and unstable believer. The goal is to fulfill the desire of the devil to neutralize and immobilize the believer from fulfilling his/her amazing potential for spiritual impact in that generation.

John dealt with the same problem in his ministry. He warns (1Jo 2:18–23) of the coming of Antichrist and of the spirit of antichrist that was alive and well in his time. Consider the following scenario: Jesus came in meekness and humility, and the world scorned Him and crucified Him. Satan will in due time bring onto the stage of history a man who will convince the world that he is the Christ; such is the deceptive power of the devil. But John reminds us that we have the anointing and indwelling of the Spirit of God, by which we should be able to discern such kinds of evil. And he points out that this discernment begins in what one says about Jesus Christ (1Jo 2:22–23). One simply cannot have the truth if he is not accurate in presenting the Lord Jesus Christ. Some cults present Jesus as simply a man anointed with the “Christ spirit.” Others declare Him to be an angel, sent from God in the form of a man. Though they speak of Jesus Christ and claim to honor Him, they are false teachers empowered by a false spirit. Thus the incipient Gnosticism of John’s day has blossomed into full-grown, world-wide cults in our day. But evil will always be evil, and evil must always be discerned for what it is. How we need men and women of true biblical discernment in our “*evil and adulterous generation*” (Mat 12:39)!

Summary:

1. Just as accurate Bible teaching produces spiritual maturity and the ability to discern good and evil (Heb 5:14), so false or muddled teaching will lead into evil.
2. Good and evil meet together in the false teacher, in that he develops a polished outward image of “good,” combined with high sounding rhetoric, but all to conceal his evil intentions and practices.
3. Untrained and spiritually unskilled believers will always find the false teacher to be more likeable and palatable than the faithful teacher of God’s Word, as the entire 2nd epistle of Corinthians shows (cf., 1Co 15:9–10; 2Co 11:5).
4. Those who choose to follow false teachers are partakers of their evil, and will also share in the shame and humiliation of their ultimate exposure. Compare Numbers 16 with 2Jo 9–11; 3Jo 9–12.

5. The spirit of Antichrist (2Jo 7), as part of the mystery of iniquity (2Th 2:7), is constantly at work to deceive and mislead believers (2Co 11:4). Only consistent teaching and steady growth can thwart that deceptive power.

V. **Spiritual Blindness and the Preference for Evil—Mat 3:7–12; Luk 6:9; Act 15:1–5; Gal 2:1–5, 11–21**

Introduction:

When the unbeliever becomes hardened against the Gospel of Jesus Christ, he becomes a captive of evil thinking and evil doing. Every aspect of life is seen through a distorted spiritual lens, for the purpose of attacking the truth and supporting his twisted world-view. He will often find as his ally the weak believer who is confused and misled by muddled and inconsistent biblical instruction. As mentioned in the last section, untrained, carnal believers are susceptible to the wiles of the false teacher. In fact, when carnality becomes an unchecked way of life, there will develop the preference for false teaching and evil, as it gives comfort and excuse to their sinful lifestyle. Thus, the hardened unbeliever will often team up with the spiritually retarded believer to attack the truth or the messenger of it. This bizarre situation is seen in the following passages.

A. **A Brood of Vipers and Their Love of Religion—Mat 3:7–12**

John, the Baptizer, was not a man to mince words. His baptism was intended as an outward evidence of inward repentance (Mat 3:11; Mar 1:4; Luk 3:3). Apart from the inner conviction and transformation, the outward act was worthless hypocrisy. In the same way, Christian baptism, apart from regeneration through faith (Joh 3:3–8; 2Co 5:17; Tit 3:5–6) is not only meaningless, it is harmful. It sends the message that salvation is due to some religious work on our part, instead of being “*by grace ... through faith*” (Eph 2:8).

Therefore, when John saw the Pharisees and Sadducees standing in line for baptism, he identified their unregenerate condition in the phrase “*brood of vipers*” (Mat 3:7). In other words, he identified them as the spawn of Satan. This is not surprising since Jesus did the same later on (Joh 8:44). The problem for the religious leaders was that they believed in the principle, “*Let us do evil that good may come*” (Rom 3:8).

In essence, all religion in whatever form, believes that good may be attained by doing evil. The problem is that when one is spiritually blind, he does not see the evil. To think that sinful man might approach a holy God on the basis of works or merit of any kind is the height of evil. Yet, on the surface, religious works and observances are seen to be “good” things to do. John’s “shock treatment” was designed to shatter the illusions of the religious crowd, as well as send a clear message to the entire gathered multitude. Good can come only from God. Evil cannot produce good. An evil tree (i.e., unregenerate man) can only produce evil fruit.

Before I came to know Christ through faith at the age of 15, passages such as this gave me much concern. For John clearly declares that there are “good trees” and “evil trees,”

that is good and evil people. Jesus used the same metaphor in Mat 7:17–20. It appeared to me that the Bible was saying that some people are good, while others were evil. I had no trouble—based on my short life—determining which side of the equation I was on. What I did not understand was that all men are evil from birth (again note Jesus words in Mat 7:11). Only by the supernatural work of regeneration—the new birth—could anyone be made “good” via the imparted righteousness of Jesus Christ. As Paul so clearly and powerfully says ...

“For He [God, the Father] made Him [God, the Son] who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.” 2Co 5:21

When we receive Jesus Christ by faith, we are born into the family of God (Joh 1:12). By His creative power, we become a “new creature” in Christ (2Co 5:17). In spite of all that remains of our “old man,” the “root” of the “tree” is now good. The “new man” in Christ is not only free from sin, but he cannot produce sin in any form (1Jo 3:9). Beyond this, the “new man” is incapable of the much deeper and more mysterious thing called “evil.” The affinity for evil, with which we are all born, is in fact evidence of our fallen nature, courtesy of the devil.

B. The Affinity of Evil with Religious Observance—Luk 6:1–11

It was their entrenched affinity with evil that constantly brought the Pharisees into conflict with the Lord Jesus. The issue of the Sabbath was a perpetual source of irritation, because they viewed their rituals, not as provisions from God for a broken and sinful world, but as evidence of their own goodness. Self righteousness must always be finger-pointing at others, since finding fault in others is evidence of the rightness of the accuser. Much like our politics today. You prove your uprightness by demonizing your opponent. The Pharisees hated Jesus and used every opportunity to seek to bring an accusation against Him. Being sinful men in the very presence of God’s holiness, they saw Jesus as evil and themselves as good.

In this section, two incidents illustrate the wrong-headedness of the religious leaders. The first involved the disciples “harvesting” grain on the Sabbath. Jesus’ contempt for their evil motives comes through in His words, *“Have you not even read this ...”* (Luk 6:3). They prided themselves on their knowledge of the Old Testament. In the actions of David and the priest (1Sa 21:1–9), the Pharisees were presented with a big dilemma. While they may have arrogantly taken issue with David, it would put them in a very difficult position to consider the actions of the priest of God. If it was right to the priest to give David the consecrated bread in his time of need, how could they then condemn Jesus? His final statement must have filled them with rage, *“the Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath”* (Luk 6:5). This is a clear claim to be Deity.

The second event is related to the rightness of healing on the Sabbath. Jesus, knowing they were plotting against Him, instigates the conflict. In the presence of the synagogue audience, He sets before them good and evil. To heal is to preserve life; to fail to heal when it is possible to do so is to promote death. The question could not be simpler: *“Is it*

lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil?" (Luk 6:9). The Pharisees cannot answer because they will indict themselves as being on the side of evil. Yet the Lord has already identified them as friends of evil. They had no love for God or mankind; they loved only their own reputations as guardians of righteousness.

I well remember two such men in Australia. Their much-vaunted uprightness consisted in their ability to dig up some dirt—real or imagined—on any other Christian ministry or leader. Having been thoroughly silenced, the Pharisees watch in rage as Jesus heals the poor cripple, and then they go out and discuss how they can destroy Him. **There is no greater evil than that of religious evil.** Acting as the spokesman of God, the religious fanatic serves the purpose of Satan.

C. How Vipers Slither into the Church—Act 15:1–5

The incident that took place in the Church of Antioch is the issue behind the writing of the epistle of Galatians. Here, new and immature believers from the sect of the Pharisees try to import circumcision from the Jewish Law into the church as a requirement for salvation. Paul has a very good argument against this, worth reading in Romans 4. But it is important to catch the deceptive evil involved here. One of the reasons evil is difficult to discern is because it uses the very Word of God to do the work of the devil. For example:

1. Circumcision was given by God as part of the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen 17:1–14). To the Jew, it was a sign of belonging to the people of God. Even the apostle Paul argued that Abraham was the father of believers (Rom 4:12; Gal 3:9, 29). Therefore surely God would require of us what He required of Abraham. Circumcision was given by God, therefore circumcision is good, and therefore it must be essential for salvation. So goes the reasoning of the confused.
2. The same reasoning is used today by equally confused people with regard to baptism, or church membership, or other good works. Even more diabolical is the present trend to become a self-designated “fruit inspector,” with the power to declare anyone unsaved who does not produce spiritual fruit in accordance with your own standard.

By this, works is brought into salvation through the back door. It is said we are saved by grace, but if sufficient good works are not in evidence, then you were never saved in the first place. Fear is then instilled in the consciences of many saved but sensitive believers. Being all too aware of their own sinfulness and frailty, they are kept on a treadmill of good works, all to prove that they truly are saved, instead of resting in the finished work of Christ and their faith in it. It is precisely in this way that “vipers” slither (see Gal 2:4) into the church. In the place where freedom should reign (Gal 5:1, 13), they bring the “*yoke of bondage*.” So subtle is this spiritual sleight-of-hand that even the apostle Peter was unable to discern its presence.

D. Cursed Teachers and Confused Believers—Gal 1:8–9, 2:1–21

1. Paul’s curse on those who preach “*any other gospel*” in Gal 1:8–9 needs to be broadcast today. Note that in verse 8, Paul applies the potential curse to himself or an angel from heaven if they preach a gospel at variance with what he had previously preached. But in verse 9, he moves from the hypothetical to the real. Someone was preaching a false gospel (not Paul), and he was under the curse of God. The tragedy is that some of the Galatian believers—due to lack of discernment—had gotten caught up in the false theology. The issue was that of circumcision, which first made its appearance in the church of Antioch. What had then been settled by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem (Acts 15) had yet survived and spread.

This is the nature of heresy and its success due to spiritual immaturity and lack of discernment of evil. Paul makes it very clear that the Gospel he preached was received by direct revelation from Jesus Christ (Gal 1:12). He was given insight none of the other apostles had been given. Today, it is fashionable to accuse Paul of perverting the original Gospel of Jesus Christ. However, the form of the Gospel in the Gospels is that of the “gospel of the kingdom” a uniquely Jewish message (note Mat 10:5–7). To say “*the kingdom of heaven is at hand*” was in effect to say “the King is here.” In rejecting their King, the Jews lost their kingdom for a time. After the crucifixion and resurrection, the kingdom is postponed, and the church is established. The message now is totally focused on the new birth—regeneration—by faith in the Person and work of Jesus Christ (1Co 15:1–5; Gal 2:16).

2. The second chapter of Galatians is Paul’s historical record, presented for two primary reasons. First of all, Gal 2:1–10 confirms that his Gospel, which was upheld by the Jerusalem council (Acts 15), was not received from any of the other apostles. It was they who bowed to his revelation (Gal 2:2, 6–10) and not the other way around.
3. Secondly, Gal 2:11–21 demonstrates that his authority was accepted even by Peter, whom he rebuked and corrected. Religious peer pressure got to Peter, who began observing Jewish dietary and social custom when the legalistic faction arrived. One may ask, what difference does it make if he wants to do that? Ask Paul. He says of Peter and Barnabas (a very grace-oriented man) that they gave in to hypocrisy (Gal 2:13), and that this allegiance with legalism (salvation or spirituality by laws or works) was “*not straightforward about the truth of the Gospel*” (Gal 2:14). Peter’s compromise struck at the heart of biblical truth. Paul’s rebuke of Peter in public is brilliant.

He first states the fact that both he and Peter, being Jews, knowing that the Law could not save them, had believed in Jesus Christ for salvation (justification) (Gal 2:15–16).

Therefore, having admitted the powerlessness of the Law for salvation, why was he now attempting to enforce it on the Gentiles (Gal 2:14)? Furthermore, if one who is justified by faith is caught up in sin, does that make Christ the minister of sin (Gal 2:17–18)? Peter cannot claim to be acting in the power or by the leading of Jesus Christ in what he has done. Rather, he has made himself the transgressor. In other words, Peter must accept responsibility for his wrongful actions, and not try some evil ploy of claiming “special

guidance” from God. All this goes back to Gal 1:8–9. Any man who claims to have “special revelation,” which runs contrary to the revealed Word of God, is a servant of evil and is under God’s curse. Peter could not justify himself and had to submit to Paul’s public rebuke. The conclusion is that if Peter had to admit falling into evil, how could the false teachers who were now plaguing the Galatian church, find justification for perverting the Gospel? The moment we seek to mingle law with grace, we “nullify the grace of God” (Gal 2:21). God’s grace will admit no co-mingling with the Law, otherwise “*grace is no longer grace*” (Rom 11:6). The disastrous effects of such teaching are presented in the next section.

Summary:

1. The success of evil, in its most sinister forms, depends on its appearing good.
2. Like Satan in the Garden, the false teachers who came to Antioch took something good in itself (circumcision) and made it an evil by making it a condition of salvation.
3. Had the apostle Paul not had the maturity and discernment to do battle with this heresy, where would the church have been today? Certainly the truth of the Gospel would have been clouded beyond repair.
4. The example of Peter’s compromise should be a warning to all of us of evil’s power to deceive and destroy.
5. It is impossible to overemphasize the destructive effects of evil when it finds a home in the life of any believer. Like Eve giving the fruit to Adam, evil is never satisfied unless it can lead others into its error.

VI. The Spiritual Penalty of Evil Preference—Gal 3:1–9, 5:1–10

Introduction:

In this section, Paul recounts how evil came to influence Peter, and even the firmly grace-oriented Barnabas (Gal 2:11–14). This very same evil, in which believing Pharisees reverted from the pure Gospel of God’s grace to law observance (Act 15:1–5), later permeated the Galatian church. It is important to see the after-effects of evil in the lives of believers who have fallen prey to evil due to the acceptance of false teaching.

A. Bewitched, Bewildered, and Blundering Believers—Gal 3:1–9

Paul says that the Galatian believers had been “*bewitched*.” The word *baskaino* meant to cast a spell on someone, in order to make them do what you want them to do, by using an “evil eye.” It is interesting that in ancient times, this evil eye was most often identified as envy. Envy is the most murderous motive in the evil heart of man (Jer 17:9). The Philistines envied the prosperity of Isaac and tried to destroy him (Gen 26:12–16). Joseph’s brothers envied him and sought to slay him (Gen 37:11, 18; Act 7:9). The Pharisees plotted the crucifixion because they envied Jesus (Mat 27:18; Mar 15:10). The ministry of Paul drove the religious fanatics of the Jews to envy and murderous hatred (Act 13:45, 17:5, 23:12). It may be said from these examples that envy is the epitome of evil. This is especially true of religious envy, which presents itself as having divine

sanction. It was this that Paul sought to deliver Peter from with his second question in Gal 2:17–18. Had Peter taken a further step into evil, and justified his actions as having been inspired by God, this is where he would have ended up.

The “evil eye” of the false teachers at work in Galatia was their envy of Paul’s success, and their desire to lead away the disciples after themselves (cf., Act 20:30; Gal 4:17). By claiming superior righteousness, and using religious peer pressure, they had affected the conduct of the Galatians, just as the Jerusalem faction had adversely affected the conduct of Peter and Barnabas. The result was that having begun in the Spirit by faith alone, they were now seeking to grow by means of works. They had been moved from faith to works, from the Spirit to the flesh, from truth to error, and were not even aware of what had happened. Such is the work of heretical teachers. Paul uses the example of Abraham (Gal 3:6–9) to call them back to a life of faith, with good works as the product (Eph 2:10), not the means of growth in the faith. Since the errors of the Corinthians and Galatians are rampant today, we would do well to ponder and meditate on the book of Galatians, and on Paul’s intolerance of compromise with error.

B. The Joy of Liberty and the Misery of Bondage—Gal 5:1–10

Continuing his battle against the Galatian heresy, Paul now describes the degree of damage done to the souls and lives of these Galatians. After exhorting them to “*stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free*” (Gal 5:1), he lists seven adverse effects of their failure to discern evil:

1. They had become entangled again in a yoke of bondage—Gal 5:1.

The moment that we make either salvation or spirituality a matter of works, we are enslaved to a system which we are never able to satisfy. If one work is good, more works are better. The rules, regulations, taboos, and restrictions will multiply to infinity. The reason for this is that evil teaching appeals to the evil of our sin nature. As Spurgeon said, “*Men proudly pray to be made humble. They desire to be humble that they may be admired for it.*”

The introduction of a works system appeals to the pride of man. It creates competition in the church where each tries to outdo the other. If one fasts for a day, the other must fast for a week to prove his greater dedication. A class of elitism emerges, of those who do the most, give up the most, etc. By this the believer—believing he is doing good—is enslaved to evil. Jesus made it clear: works done to be seen by men have their reward (Mat 6:1, 5). If I am to give my offerings, or do a charitable deed, in such a way that my left hand does not know what my right hand is doing (Mat 6:3), and keep my works secret as much as possible (Mat 6:4, 6), then how could anyone be the judge of whether I have sufficient works to prove my salvation?

2. They have forfeited the true spiritual profit of Christ—Gal 5:2.

We simply cannot benefit by the spiritual provisions of our Lord when we are walking contrary to His Word. These believers had no doubt lost their love for one another (it is hard to love someone you are in competition against), they had lost their joy, and they had forfeited their peace. In other words, they were living in the world, not as citizens of the kingdom of God (Rom 14:17).

3. They had become debtors to the whole Law—Gal 5:3.

If one wants to make any work of the Law the standard, he must take the whole Law (Jam 2:8–13). If we say that any specific work is a necessity to prove our status as believers, then sooner or later we must include all good works. We cannot pick and choose which ones we like, and ignore others. Debtors are not happy people, which is why legalists are miserable and mean. They actually hate their own Christian life, and nothing makes them meaner than when they see a Christian who “love[s] life” (1Pe 3:10). Fanatical Puritanism has been described as the fear that someone, somewhere, is having a good time.

4. They have become estranged from Christ—Gal 5:4a.

Like a married couple who is miserable in their marriage, these believers were alienated from the One who loved them most. Like Gomer was to Hosea, they were seeking fulfillment where it could not be found. The more frantic we become to work our way into God’s favor, the more miserable we become. The word translated “*estranged*” is *katargeo*, meaning to “render powerless, nullify.” They had “pulled the plug” on their spiritual life; the light had gone out (Eph 5:14).

5. This alienation is further described as having “fallen from grace”—Gal 5:4b.

When a believer fails to avail himself of God’s gracious provisions for living the Christian life, bitterness is sure to follow (Heb 12:15). We simply cannot live a dynamic spiritual life in our own strength. Humble reliance on the power vested in the Word of God, and His indwelling Spirit, allows God to freely work in our lives. Christ Jesus lives in and through us, not because we are working, but because we are trusting Him. Life truly becomes, not a treadmill of religious activities, but a spiritual rest (Mat 11:29–30), a daily “Sabbath-rest” (Heb 4:3, 9). When we rest in Him we “cease from our own works” (Heb 4:10). The power is not in us, but in the ever dynamic Word of God (Heb 4:12). This is the true spiritual life.

6. They had been “tripped up” in the race of life—Gal 5:7.

The word “*hindered*” is *egkopto*, meaning “to cut in on.” Instead of “*run[ning] with endurance the race set before us*” (Heb 12:1), they had been forced off the track. Someone had cut them off from obeying the truth. There is much talk of “obedience,” and it is an important subject, but must always, always be prefaced with the truth that

obedience begins with faith. It is faith in God's Word that gives the power, through the Spirit, for the obedience. Those who press for works or fruit, without clear and accurate teaching about **how** God works within us, have put the proverbial cart before the horse. Again, as Spurgeon has said, "*they raise a lot of dust, but go nowhere.*"

7. They have become permeated by the leaven of evil—Gal 5:9.

Like leaven, or yeast, a small amount introduced into the mix will, in time, spread throughout. This is always the result of evil teaching, legalism, and works-religions. It can destroy a church. It will certainly destroy the life of any believer ensnared by it. Beware of those who come "*in sheep's clothing, but inwardly ... are ... wolves*" (Mat 7:15) with envious motives. They will make merchandise of you, and in the end abandon you when your usefulness to their cause is over. Paul makes it clear that the author of this confusion, who was under his earlier curse, would receive the due judgment (Gal 5:10). But for the Galatian believers, he trusts that by the grace of God they will go on to victory.

Summary:

1. None of us are exempt from deception, as is illustrated by Peter in Gal 2.
2. If we are caught up in some form of false teaching or evil conduct, the best we can hope for is a friend like Paul.
3. Evil is difficult to discern, precisely because it parades itself as truth and goodness.
4. Involvement in evil creates an inner vacuum leading to a downward spiral in our spiritual life.
5. The solution is a return to simple faith, resting in God's grace, growing in His Word, and trusting the indwelling Holy Spirit to perform in us what is pleasing to God.
6. It takes courage to stand fast in our spiritual freedom and to refuse to allow some self-styled superior Christian to set the agenda for our life (Col 2:16). However, the spiritual rewards are worth it!

VII. The Blessedness of Victory Over Evil—1Pe 3:8–12; Rom 12:17–21, 13:3–4, 14:16, 16:17–20; 3Jo 11

It is an axiom of Scripture that evil brings cursing from God, while genuine good, produced by faith through the indwelling Spirit of God in accordance with His Word, will result in blessedness (Jer 17:5–8). This is why each of us must see every day—with its multitudes of decisions—as filled with opportunity for either increasing blessedness or a by-path into cursing. Sooner or later, God in His infinite justice will render to every man according to his deeds (Rom 2:6). If we are wise, we will begin to sow from the Spirit, having the assurance that the harvest of wise thinking and action will be well worthwhile. Victory over evil is not found in some great event or effort, but rather in the multitude of small decisions and actions of daily life.

A. Standing at the Crossroads of Good and Evil—1Pe 3:8–12

Here the apostle Peter presents us with the contrast of good versus evil, blessing versus cursing. The control of the Spirit of God is implied in 1Pe 3:8, as the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22–23) is clearly in view. Apart from a life filled and controlled by the Spirit (Eph 5:1–2, 8–9, 18; Gal 5:16), we lack the power to demonstrate the unity, love and compassion of which he speaks. When we are cursed in some way, the natural response is to curse in return. This is done on a daily basis as part of living in a fallen and broken world. However, when we give in to the temptation to return evil for evil, we have stepped outside the triumphant life of Christ,

“... who when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously; who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness— by whose stripes you were healed.” 1Pe 2:23–24

It is in the light and power of His total victory over sin and evil on the cross that we are to live. Contrary to being agents of evil, serving the evil one, we are to be ministers and channels of blessing, even to the most spiteful around us. We must remember that ...

“Christ suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God” 1Pe 3:18

In His sacrificial death, He bore and suffered evil, in order to defeat evil and deliver us from the power of evil. As we shall see, only divine good is able to conquer evil. For the one who genuinely desires to love life, and see the hand of God’s blessing on it, Peter sets out the path to follow. By reliance on the indwelling Spirit, three steps are required:

1. First, there must be control of the tongue (1Pe 3:10). As James tells us (Jam 3:1–2), only the “*perfect man*” (i.e., spiritually mature) is able to bridle the tongue. And as Jesus taught (Mat 15:18–20), our use of the tongue is an indicator of the contents of our heart.
2. Secondly, there must be a definite turning from evil to the doing of good (1Pe 3:11a). It is important to distinguish what Peter here calls “good” from the superficial concept of “good deeds.” Good, in whatever form, apart from God is not good, but evil. Thus we refer to the biblical concept of good as divine good, that is, good originating in the Spirit of God in accordance with the Word of God.

As previously mentioned, C.H. Spurgeon rightly discerned the difference when he said, “*Men proudly pray to be made humble. They wish to be humble that they may be admired for it.*” It is precisely in this way that much that looks “good” on the surface is the more diabolically evil. It was this very “good” which Jesus exposed in the Pharisees to be the highest form of spiritual corruption (Mat

23:13–36). The ultimate exposure of evil is that which takes place within our own heart and soul (Eph 5:8–14).

3. Finally, there must be a daily, persistent search and pursuit of peace (1Pe 3:11b). Peace is the fruit of reconciliation with God (Rom 5:1, 8–11). Only the soul at peace with God can minister peace in a fractured and fighting world. We cannot hope to give what we do not have. We “*seek peace*” through our daily fellowship with our Lord in study and prayer. We are then enabled to “*pursue peace*” in our relations with those around us. As the author of the epistle to the Hebrews tells us,

“Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord; looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled ...” Heb 12:14–15

It is clear that until we possess holiness through the imputed righteousness of Christ, apart from which we will not see Him, neither will we be enabled to pursue peace with those around us. Heavenly peace must precede peace on earth. Further, even we who have received of His holiness are capable of allowing bitterness to take root in response to some real or imagined injustice done to us. When this happens we “*fall short*” or fail to utilize the grace of God, resulting in words, decisions, and actions that cause us trouble and defile others. Interestingly, the word “defile” originally spoke of someone on whom the “chamber pot” had been spilled.

Going back to Peter, he then assures us of the gracious attentiveness of God upon those who resist evil (v.12), both in His omniscient watch-care and in His responsiveness to our prayers. It is by His gracious guardianship and provision that we enjoy “good days” and a life worth loving. But, should we choose the path of evil, He will set His face against us, a figure of speech for His resistance to us. As Peter tells us later,

“God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” 1Pe 5:5b

B. The Victory of Divine Good Over Evil—Rom 12:14–21

In this section of the Scriptures, the apostle Paul sums up in a single sentence the key to victory over evil.

“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” Rom.12:21

The source of this victory is found in Rom 12:1–2, in which Paul amplifies the earlier thought in Rom 6:12–14 and 19 regarding presenting oneself to God as an instrument of righteousness. It is in submission and reliance on God’s Spirit that all divine good is accomplished. Here, in the context from Rom 12:14 onward, Paul gives several simple examples of what he means:

1. To those who persecute, we give blessing. Many examples can be found of Christians suffering intense persecution who, throughout their ordeal, loudly prayed for their tormentors, and took every opportunity to win them to faith in Christ.
2. We can enter into the experiences of others as we either rejoice or weep with them, demonstrating care and compassion.
3. We can choose to associate with those who are humble, poor, or outcast.
4. We might jettison our “know-it-all” attitude.
5. We can seek what is ultimately good for every person with whom we have contact.
6. To the extent we are able, we can be peaceable with all men (Rom 12:18). It is true that some have no desire for peace, and there may come a time when we must deal with them strictly, having exhausted efforts at peace. It is ludicrous to assume that, desiring to live at peace with all men, I should take a pacifistic stance to the criminal intruding into my home and threatening my family. The phrase “*if it is possible,*” places limits on my efforts at peace. To permit loved ones to be victimized so that I may appear “righteous” in my pacifism is akin to the earlier quote of Spurgeon regarding humility. Paul clearly spells this out in 1Ti 5:8:

“But if anyone does not provide for his own, especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.”

Any man who would provide food, clothing, and shelter for his family, only to allow a criminal to rape and plunder as he cowers in his pacifism has definitely denied the faith! Even worse are those who claim to follow a pacifistic lifestyle yet expect others (police, military, firemen, etc.) to protect them and keep them safe while risking life and limb. These people are not to be admired for their hypocrisy. This may seem to contradict the command “*do not avenge yourselves*” (Rom 12:19), but anyone with a little common sense knows the difference between vengeance and defense. Our laws rightly distinguish between the person who might use deadly force in defense of his life or family, yet consider it a criminal act to fire on one who is fleeing the scene of the crime. When evil has been done, leave the vengeance to God. Otherwise, as Edmund Burke said, “*The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.*” How right he was!

But the person who has declared himself our enemy—for whatever reason—when found in need, is to be fed, given drink, and whatever other care is in our power. Such is the story of the “good Samaritan” (Luk 10:25–37). Though scorned, despised, and afflicted at every opportunity by the average Jew, this man, finding his “enemy” beaten and left for dead, has compassion, and does for him all that is in his power. It is in just such a way that good, divine good, inspired by God’s Word and carried out by reliance on His Spirit, will conquer the many evils of our very evil age.

C. Choosing the Good in an Evil Society—Rom 13:1–4, 8–10, 14:14–18

I will not go into detail regarding these passages, other than to present them for the reader's consideration as Paul continues his thought of overcoming evil by good. Examples of submission to duly appointed authorities, demonstrating love to our neighbor, and having a genuine concern for our brothers and sisters in Christ are all a means to the desired end of victory over evil. As a good summary statement, consider the words of Paul in Rom 14:17:

*“for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking
[nor any other thing we might consider important], but righteousness
and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit ...”*

Only by the life of the Holy Spirit, imparted to us at regeneration, are we enabled to attain victory in the age-old conflict of good versus evil. It is my prayer that these studies may be used by God to assist the listener and reader in his/her own battles against the presence and power of evil in our age.

Summary:

1. In the spiritual battle, as in any war, there is no substitute for total victory.
2. Victory over evil is not won by our efforts, but by our faith (1Jo 5:4–5).
3. He or she who would have a victorious life must, in faith and submission, be devoted to prayer, Bible study, and fellowship with the saints. These are done not to compete or compare, but for the nurture of faith.
4. The power for true Christian living is found in two sources: the inspired Word of God, and the indwelling Holy Spirit.
5. The “good” by which the evil is overcome is divine good, that is, presented by God’s Word, and practiced by His Spirit in and through us.
6. Divine good is like an iceberg, the greater part of which is unseen.
7. It is in the nature of genuine good that it does not seek to call attention to itself.
8. Since it is true that the author and source of all good is God, then it is also true that any credit, praise, or honor for deeds that are good goes to Him alone.

The Biblical Definition of Evil

1. In order to discern and avoid evil, we must first clearly define it.
Point: You cannot discern, nor defeat, what you are not able to define.
2. The English definition from the Merriam-Webster’s Deluxe Dictionary is: “morally reprehensible: sinful, wicked ... causing harm, pernicious,” etc. It is interesting that we find here elements suggested by biblical language.
3. In the Hebrew the word *ra* or *ra’ah* carries the connotation of that which is by nature bad in the sense that it causes or involves affliction, sorrow, distress. The root meaning of the word is “to spoil, break in pieces, make worthless.” It speaks of that which is harmful or injurious, whether spiritually or physically.

4. In the Greek of the New Testament several words are used, but the principal three are listed here:
 - a. *Kakos* and its cognates. This word speaks of what is evil in character or malignant in its effects. It is moral or ethical evil having an injurious, destructive effect or consequence. *Kakos* is the opposite of *kalos* and *agathos* (noble, honorable, good).
 - b. *Poneros* is often translated “iniquity or wickedness,” but with emphasis on the harmful and sorrowful consequences of it. It is used of Satan as “*the evil one*” (Mat 5:37, 6:13, 13:19, etc.). *Poneros* is opposite of *chrestos* (gracious, kind).
 - c. Also used is *phaulos*, with a primary meaning of “that which is worthless, base, or useless.” This is used in Rom 9:11; 2Co 5:10; and Tit 2:8, where it is contrasted to what is “good,” in the sense that it falls short of what is best.

5. The biblical concept of evil is much broader and more complex than that of sin. Evil encompasses motive, action, and harmful effects. All evil originates with Satan, “the evil one” (Mat 13:19, 38). God is not the source of evil, being separate from all that is evil (Jam 1:13). In passages such as Isa 45:7, where we read, “*I form the light and create darkness, I make peace and create calamity [evil],*” God is speaking of calamity, in the form of His wrath. When men rebel against Him, His wrath comes into play, which men indeed consider evil, but is in fact an expression of His antipathy to evil (Rom 1:18, 2:9).

6. Through the ages, philosophers have wrestled with the “problem of evil,” primarily as a way of explaining away the existence or goodness of God. The basic argument goes, “If God is both good and all-powerful, why then does He not destroy evil? Since He does not, He must either not be good, or not be all-powerful, or not exist.” Paul, in essence, answers this question in 1Co 1:18–25 “*because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.*” In the context, he is speaking of the cross of Jesus Christ—the means by which God chose to defeat and destroy sin and evil. The philosophers, for the most part, reject the solution of God, for the simple reason that it places on their shoulders (and that of every individual) to choose where they will stand regarding evil. Jesus makes it clear that to reject His sacrifice is to choose for evil (Joh 16–21). Thus light and darkness picture good and evil; the unbelieving philosopher, who claims to have intellectual light, is shown to prefer living in the darkness.

7. Evil may be distinguished in the Bible in two categories: the natural and the spiritual or moral. Spiritual evil speaks of that which God’s creatures (angels and mankind) are capable of in opposition to all that is good or of God. Natural evil includes storms, disasters, diseases, injuries, etc. In the ultimate sense, all natural evil is a consequence of spiritual (or moral) evil, coming down from the sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden. In the miracle healings of Jesus, we are shown immediately what the victory of faith over sin and evil will be for every believer ultimately (Mat 9:22; Mar 6:56; Luk 8:48).

8. It soon becomes clear from the study of the Scriptures that what often “looks good” turns out to be evil. Take for example the temptation of Eve, where “*the woman saw*” the tree of the knowledge of good and evil as “*good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and*

a tree desirable to make wise” (Gen 3:6). The true evil, however, was not in the tree, but in its prohibition by God, and experienced by the sorrowful aftereffects (Gen 3:7–8, 14–19). How many times have we heard the question, “But how can it be wrong, when it feels so right?” Time and consequences prove again and again that what looks good, apart from the spiritual compass of the Bible, turns out to be exceedingly evil.

9. In light of the above point, we begin to see just why spiritual growth is essential in order to discern (distinguish between) good and evil. Superficial evaluation often leads one to conclude that something is good, when in fact it results in very painful and sorrowful consequences.
10. Today the entire world is suffering the effects of shallow politicians and equally foolish populations, who continue to choose one evil policy after another, all because it is “good” in appearance, or is presented as “the greater good for the greater number” of people. In fact, every vaunted policy designed to “fix the problem” (whatever it may be at the time) actually results in creating more problems, all having multiplied evil affects.
11. Only divine viewpoint, based on the accurate knowledge of the Word of God, is able to discern between good and evil. This is because the solutions to the “evils” of this world require choosing the path that looks “evil” in order to reach the desired “good.” The solution to the “evil” of poverty is hard work and industry. But the lazy person, who desires a prosperous life, views hard work as the real “evil,” therefore seeks to become a ward of the state, votes for every “handout” or “bailout” policy, and in the end comes to the real evil—a bankrupt nation.
12. The ultimate illustration of this principle is the cross of Jesus Christ. In order to resolve the issue of all the world’s evils, our Lord had to choose what appeared to be the greatest personal evil, death by crucifixion. Though the disciples considered it “good” for Him to avoid the cross by any means, He looked beyond the immediate agony and anguish, and *“for the joy set before Him endured the cross”* (Heb 12:2). Thus the philosopher calls God a “fool” or “weak” and mocks the Son of God—willing to meet evil in its lair—thereby suffering its worst agonies to defeat evil forever for everyone who will believe in Him.
13. Good and evil will last forever—each in its own domain. Heaven will be the dwelling place of all that is good, where no evil will ever enter. Hell will be the abode of all that is evil and the home for all who chose evil over good. In the end it is proven that the issue of evil’s beginning, that for Satan, Adam and Eve—and ultimately each of us—the exercise of our free will either choose for God and good, or reject Jesus Christ in preference to evil. This is Paul’s point in Rom 2:1–11.