

**Medicine of the Person  
Prague, 23-26 July 2003**

**Bible Study**

**Choices good and evil ; is God in control ?**

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By this time in our conference, we must already have considered basic ideas of free-will, constraints on free choice, and the varieties of good and evil that we all choose. Therefore, and acknowledging the current international context, I decided to reflect upon **Matthew 15, 10 - 11 & 15 - 20** and **John 14, 15 - 26; John 15, 10 - 17; John 16, 8**, and the issue of free human choice alongside a parallel issue: how much is God in control?

**Matthew 15, 10 - 11; 15 - 20**

Jesus answered....."Do you not see that whatever goes in by the mouth passes into the stomach and so is discharged into the drain? But what comes out of the mouth has its origins in the heart; and that is what defiles a man. Wicked thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, purgery, slander - these all proceed from the heart; and these are the things that defile a man."

**John 14, 15 - 26; 15, 10 - 17; 16, 8.**

Jesus....."If you love me, you will obey my commands; and I will ask the Father, and he will give you another to be your Advocate, who will be with you for ever - the Spirit of truth.....will teach you everything, and call to mind all that I have told you.....and show where wrong and right and judgement lie"

"If you heed my commands, you will dwell in my love, as I have heeded my father's commands and dwell in his love..... You did not choose me; I chose you. I appointed you to go on and bear fruit, fruit that shall last.....This is my commandment to you: love one another."

A. 1. As I write, war is raging in Iraq and man's capacity to choose evil is in everyone's mind, whatever our political view. Terrorist attacks, oppression by governments, aggression by one country against another, neglect of human suffering in other countries, can be matched on the individual level by vicious murders, sexual assaults, child abuse in families, and so on. They are reported unreservedly in the media and we can easily get the impression that they are more common than they are, but they remain a reality in all our lives.

Our own sins may seem pretty uninteresting by comparison, but we all know our own failures in the past and our capacity to choose evil rather than good, even if the scale is small. Though we won't always agree on what is right and wrong, within the context of our own belief systems and expectations of behaviour we sometimes choose right things and we sometimes choose wrong things. And all the wicked things reported in our media were choices made by people; people who generally look remarkably like us.

2. People did these things; they chose to do them, but why? Jesus said that evil comes from out of the heart of man, but are there not also other factors that influence or determine our choices? We know some influences:

damaged minds, and disordered personalities; though we often don't understand much about causes.

strong cultures which bind their people into a very limited world view, or which seek to dominate others, or cannot tolerate variety or dissent.

disordered personal relationships; inter-personal conflicts.

disordered international or inter-group relationships; oppression; discrimination; de-valuation; etc.

Sometimes these are very powerful and help to explain wicked behaviour, sometimes even to excuse it, but the decisions still lie in the individual human mind, the choices still lie in the individual human heart, from selfishness, envy, fear, anger, hatred, vengeance etc. In spite of the many influences upon us, with few exceptions we must accept responsibility for our own choices, our own behaviour, our own actions. The Bible is very clear from the story of the Fall on, that we have free-will; we can choose good or ill.

B. But even when this is agreed, whenever something really evil is reported, it is very common for people to ask 'Why did God permit it?' 'What was He doing to allow it to happen?' even 'Why did God do it?' Is he in control of this world or not? After all, he is described in the Book of Revelation (1,8) as "I am alpha and omega, says the Lord God, who is and who was, and who is to come, the Sovereign Lord of all."

Here is a real dilemma: If God is God - omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent, - how can he **not** be in control? Is he not Sovereign? Is he not Almighty? Does he not reign in his kingdom? These ancient perceptions of God are still the emphasis of many modern Christian worship songs. But, if he is in full control, a puppet-master, pulling all the strings, then he is responsible for everything that happens, good and evil; then how can he be a loving God? And how can we have free will? Many Christians find it very difficult to believe that God is not in total control of the world; this would make him seem not a big enough god! And it is very common for people to blame Him for things that go wrong. For example:

1. When lightning struck York Minster a few years ago, there were Christians who said that it was God's punishment for the then Archbishop of York's liberal theology.

2. Many people, when something terrible happens to them say "Why has God done this to me?" They might explain it as being punished, or taught a lesson, or guided towards some action, but they perceive God's hand behind it.

3. When our daughter-in-law lost her first child, a Christian colleague tried to comfort her by saying that God was specifically teaching her something by allowing her baby to die, an idea she found obscene and distressing.

4. We all pray for God to intervene in the world in a variety of ways - what do we really expect him to do, and how? Is he in control?

### C. Can we reconcile these things?

1. We must first distinguish events which cause suffering but arise because our world is governed by physical laws and would not work without them. We are subject to these laws. We don't know them all, but they determine earthquakes, cancers, and no doubt, the problems of our daughter-in-law and her baby. We should discover them as much as possible, and how to control them for the benefit of the whole world, but, ultimately, we are born to die!

One of our preachers, a young woman, had cancer diagnosed a few years ago, and friends and family said "why you?". But she said "why not me?".

When Jesus resisted the temptations in the wilderness, he was refusing to try to act against the natural laws of the universe. They are what God has given us to work with and live by. They are not evil, even when pain and suffering result; this is the world we live in. I do not believe that God ever makes or deliberately permits such tragedies; but that does not mean that he cannot use them with us to advantage - we can grow as people, and can gain sympathy for others through pain and suffering (though it is not inevitable!).

2. The real problem of evil (rather than pain and suffering) is moral - it is a consequence of human action, a product of the human heart. We have free will, and often make wrong, that is sinful choices; we are all capable of good and evil. We also create evil unknowingly, failing to understand the consequences of our individual actions, or to appreciate the consequences of our collective actions in society, such as poverty in the third world.

We don't need to blame God for these; so what control does he have? It may seem hard to argue that there are things that God cannot do, except that, if he is the loving heavenly father that Jesus showed us, he cannot do things against his own nature; he cannot do or deliberately allow evil things which he could have prevented. But he can and does permit us to make choices with our free will, even wrong, evil choices, because goodness is not good unless freely chosen, just as love has no value unless freely chosen.

The conclusion is that God is not in control in the simple sense in which people usually mean that - that everything that happens is somehow done or permitted by God. He is not a puppet-master, holding all the strings!

3. But God is at work, through us, and all who respond to his spirit. Perhaps we can see this as a way of increasing his degree of control, that is of increasing goodness, love and justice in the world. This is building up his Kingdom on earth. We cannot see all the ways in which his spirit works in his world, but we can know that he not only offers us forgiveness for wrong choices, but also the spiritual resources to change our way of making choices.

In **John 14-16**, Jesus is promising the Holy Spirit, and commanding us to love, but so much of it is also about choosing. We can choose whether or not to love and obey God; God loves us and commands us to love one another; the Holy Spirit will "teach you everything", will inform our life choices, because they are God's choices for us to spread his love in the world.

"God is spirit", and he relates to us spiritually; that is, in a relationship which is personal to him and to us, in which love, encouragement and forgiveness predominate. In the incarnation we see the man, Jesus, experiencing and demonstrating the in-dwelling spirit of God, perfectly expressed. Identifying with Jesus, we follow him in relationship with God our loving Father,

who has promised to give us also his in-dwelling spirit who "will show where wrong and right and judgement lie." He will help us make right choices with our free will.

4. This is not wholly satisfactory! It is too rational, too simple (as we are bound to be, looking for explanations). We will never know or understand everything. There is mystery at the heart of the universe. God is in that mystery, but evident within it is his love, demonstrated for us in Jesus, where perfect goodness, love, self-sacrifice and forgiveness were revealed. We are invited to share in both the mystery of the creator God and in his revealed love through Jesus and the in-dwelling spirit.