

OCTOBER 19, 2025

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

SERMON “*Evil Is as Evil Does*” Isaiah 5:18-23, 1 Corinthians 8:1-13

This week our message answers a very good question. “If someone commits an action, is it evil if they don’t know/believe it’s evil?”

This is a great question. It touches on several things all of which are important in our current times. Rather than give a one word “yes” or “no” it’s necessary to unpack a few aspects of evil.

Evil is simply anything that goes against the desires and design of God. There is no singular scriptural definition of evil, but there are examples. One of the most known is that “so and so did evil in the sight of the Lord”. Sin would be considered evil.

Sometimes people don’t like to break it down like this because it means that every one of us does things that are evil. We have views that are evil. We don’t like that. Evil is reserved for the devil and demons. It’s reserved for people who do truly, big ticket terrible things. But not for me.

I’m sorry, it’s a simple definition. And all of us are guilty. That doesn’t mean we are all evil to our core. It doesn’t mean we are all completely evil beings. It just means that we are all capable of evil to some degree or another.

Our Isaiah passage is the perfect one to begin the discussion about this question.

Isaiah is prophesying against largely the Kingdom of Judah. Throughout the book we see that the people have left a genuine faithfulness before God. He is warning them of impending punishment.

People were continuing to worship. The problem was that they were mistreating one another, abusing one another, cheating one another, being unjust, harming the innocent, allowing selfishness and arrogance to rule their choices rather than a Godly sense of community, mercy, compassion, and kindness. The result is that God really didn’t care about their worship.

In other words, go to church as much as we want, if our lives don’t reflect the goodness, love, and mercy of Christ it makes no difference. The worship is hollow. Worship doesn’t make our actions suddenly all acceptable. Acceptable actions are what make for acceptable worship.

This passage is part of a list of “woes”. This is pronouncing judgment on people who do these things that go against the design and desire of God. In particular we see “woe to those who call good evil and evil good.”

These are people who know the difference and intentionally do what is wrong and try to make it seem right. They are deceiving themselves and maybe even masses of others. They are not deceiving God. In the end God will have the final word.

The issue is that reversing the two has more than an effect on the person doing it and those who happen to fall victim to the actions they take as a result.

In order to get away with doing evil in the name of calling good, the ones doing it have to convince others of the same. Otherwise they are found out and an honest person will put a stop to it. On the other hand if they can use power and influence, that’s one way to keep everyone off their back. The other way is to convince other people that their flip of evil and good is, in fact, correct. They will deceive whomever they need to go along with them and voila! They can do evil, call it good, and get off scott free.

Often we attribute shaping values to authority figures, specifically adults and children. It is also adult to adult if we trust someone to guide us correctly. As we learn we can be persuaded to change our minds even later in life. What happens then is that the ones who know better teach others to believe their lie. Eventually when enough people are on board, for that entire group they lose the sense of what is actually what. Over time evil is seen as good and good as evil.

People are literally raised from childhood up in this confusion.

They don’t know the evil they are doing is evil because they have been taught it is good.

This is why we have differences in values in culture. Just in our nation there is urban, suburban, rural, mountain, and more cultures. There is east coast, west coast, Midwest culture. There is northern culture and southern culture. There is culture depending on what economic rung people fall into.

All of these cultures in many ways have been passed along generationally. The values are almost unconscious because they are so part of life and the idea of something different doesn’t really factor in on the day to day. It’s why you can have a conversation with someone about some topic, they will seem to agree wholeheartedly, and the next day are acting/talking the exact opposite. It’s engrained.

What makes it even more difficult when evil is called good is when it also has religion attached to it. If Jesus is stamped on those values it's incredibly hard to get a shift in perspective. Why? Because it's God! You can't get a higher authority. Attach the fear of hell or disappointing your faith community and changing an idea is terrifying.

As a freebie, here's a reliable measuring stick. Whatever we are considering ask these questions. Could I hear Jesus saying this? Could I see Jesus doing this? Could I see Jesus supporting this?

If the answer is no it's far better to change course and lend our support elsewhere.

Back to the root, however, if someone's perspective of Jesus isn't shaped by the authentic gospels but instead someone teaching evil as good and stamping His name on it, that's still a hard nut to crack.

The point is, that even in our churches, this issue in Isaiah exists. And in our cultures and churches people misleading the masses still trickles down to where people are genuinely thinking they are doing good and are in fact doing evil.

Before we get too judgmental about this something needs to be honored. All of us fall into this category. I hear all the time about "other peoples" sin that the sticking point is whether or not they repent of it. If they don't see something as sin, they aren't going to change it. And just like I may think someone is doing something wrong and they don't agree, that same person will certainly see something in my life they think is wrong that I think is right. In their eyes I am just as unrepentant as they might seem in my own.

This should produce and uncommon unity and humility. If you want to know how to fix a lot of the extreme division today there's a good start. Humility. That's the beginning of conversation. It's the beginning of compromise. It's the beginning of seeing one another as people of worth because we are open to the idea we could be mistaken.

So we know we can all mistake evil for good and vice versa.

Paul gives us another angle on the question. In our passage he is talking about meat sacrificed to idols. At the time there were people largely coming out of the Gentile community that would be struggling with this. To some of them it was wrong to eat that meat. It was defiled.

Paul disagreed. He believed that something that doesn't exist can't defile anything. Since the gods the idols represented didn't exist, there was no harm.

That said, he gives us some guidance. Even if God doesn't consider something to be wrong, if the person does it is wrong for that person. So doing the behavior becomes sinful. Not because of the action but because of the attitude. It is willfully doing something that is believed to offend God and that willingness is the sin.

As such Paul says he will regard that person's opinion and not push them to go against it. Sure, he could swagger about not caring and doing what he liked because he felt comfortable in it. What was more important than his freedom to do so was protecting the conscience of a fellow Christian. Their relationship with God was far and away more important. So he wouldn't eat that meat in front of them nor would he try to get them to do so.

There are just a couple take aways from this I'd like to highlight:

Putting one another first is essential if we are following Christ

Paul is acknowledging that God is the one who determines what is and is not evil. What is and is not good. Not us. So to answer our question, is evil evil no matter what? Yes.

What is often really at stake here is more than just is evil evil no matter what? The perhaps larger question is "what does accountability look like if I don't know I've done something wrong?"

Most of us have been told "ignorance is no excuse" when we get in trouble for breaking a rule we didn't know about. The hope is that now we know the rule and have had it driven home with interest.

This tries in some way to keep a uniformity of action and consequence. It's also dealing with actions that occur here in this physical, mortal world. It isn't dealing with eternity, spirit, and God.

Leviticus tells us that even if we are ignorant we bear the iniquity for the mistake. Keep in mind also that this is the Mosaic Law. It is behavioral. Legal.

Sure, there was a spiritual component, but there was also a major sense of making a civic order.

There are a few other passages that hint towards this question, however I think the most significant one is on the cross. Jesus looks at all of those around Him and says "forgive them because they don't know what they are doing."

"They don't know what they are doing". They are ignorant. Yet even in their ignorance and lack of faith He asks God to grant mercy and grace.

The danger here is that some might look at what I've just stated and try to pull a fast one. We've all heard someone who we know is guilty of knowingly breaking the rules say "I didn't know" as they shrug their shoulders. Even if they fool others, they aren't fooling God.

And keep in mind we are talking now in the realm of the spirit, of eternity, of the Kingdom of God.

The point is that God's grace is big enough to cover us even in our ignorance. There is a more important question at hand.

All through scripture what we see are people pursuing God. They are making mistakes. They act in ignorance. Yet somehow righteousness and grace are imparted on them. Why? It isn't their perfect action or perfect knowledge.

It is their pursuit. Romans tells us that the nature of the created world is so compelling that at the very least no one is excused from acknowledging a creating being and power. The next step is pursuing that being, God. We trust that if anyone is pursuing God, they will ultimately find the Spirit. They will find, just as we have, answers to questions of good and evil. As we all find those answers we are accountable to follow the good. To acknowledge and avoid the evil.

As Christians we trust that ultimately if someone pursues long enough they will find Jesus. But even until that moment comes God continues to guide and draw. It's why we see people who act incredibly loving and kind despite not sharing our faith. The lie of evil being good is also why we see people claiming to share our faith acting in hateful and heartless ways.

How does God sort out those who are pursuing yet don't find Jesus before they pass? I can't tell you. The reasons for this are innumerable. The constant conundrum is always how God sorts out those who've never heard the gospel. Can't say.

What I do know is that all of us are responsible for who and what we pursue. And if we pursue God we will slowly but surely uncover God's desires and design. In this we find that grace that covers even our ignorance. If Jesus' love was big enough to offer forgiveness on the cross to those who pursued Him only to put Him up there, how assured can we be that His love can cover us despite our ignorance when we are pursuing Him as Lord of our lives?

Make no mistake, there is such a thing as right and wrong, good and evil. Also make no mistake that no matter how hard we try, ultimately we will mistake one for the other. And make this clear as well. So long as we pursue God day by day, the grace of Christ is big enough to cover even our misunderstandings.

Don't grow weary in seeking God. Don't grow weary in asking questions when things are out of whack or not making sense. When the Kingdom of God seems far off, ask why. Then look to the Jesus of the gospels. He will show us where we need to stand firm and where we have been mistaken. And then we change to become more like Him.

As we do the Kingdom of God grows in our hearts. Our purposes in this world become more clear. We find ways to grow the community and the community of faith around us closer together. We become more and more the light that shines peace and unity that guides us all to accomplish the desires and design of Almighty God.

BIBLE STUDY Mark 6

After a chapter of incredible stories of faith making the sick whole and raising a dead girl back to life Mark gives us a strong contrast. The point of this passage seems clear when put up against what came before. Faith is critical to bring about the blessings of Jesus. The ones who have faith receive. The ones who do not limit Jesus' ability to perform His wonders.

This brings up a good point about God's omnipotence. We are taught this early on. "God can do anything". This simply isn't true. God can't violate God's own nature. Therefore if God is ultimately loving, God can't be unloving. If God is compassion, God can not be cruel. This is important to keep in mind. The nature of God's greatness is self-limiting. Here we see that Jesus', who we see as divine, is limited in His miracle performing. The people have to believe He is able and want it. To be otherwise is to cut ourselves off from that blessing.

What draws this out is that Jesus is home. He is with his family and those who knew Him "way back when". This is a common experience. Someone goes away and becomes something more, learns new things that elevate their ability to understand and teach. Then they return and, particularly if what they are saying goes against the ideas already present in their home, are dismissed. The different isn't easily embraced. And it's hard to accept one of our own can rise that far above ourselves.

To make this point Mark reveals Jesus' occupation. He is a simple carpenter, known to His hometown. Not only do we find Jesus has siblings, the brothers are named and the sisters mentioned. Mary is brought up but no Joseph! What happened to Him?

We don't know is the honest answer. He could have died by this point. Regardless, Mark is unconcerned with the birth story we are so familiar with in Matthew and Luke. Mark may not even be aware of that story. As such the questions we might have he isn't worried about. They are our questions based on our own understanding of scripture. Mark is writing what would become scripture and he is just worried about telling the

story of this Messiah.

What is important here is that Jesus has common roots. He wasn't anything special, making His new role all the more surprising.

It's hard for the people who changed Jesus' diaper to see Him in an elevated light. It's difficult for those who saw Him poking fun at schoolmates and maybe being even a bit ornery as a child to believe He's come to this place and position in His life. They don't see Him as a Messiah. They see Him as Jesus, Mary's son who built their kitchen cabinets.

The result is that their faith is limited, and therefore so is Jesus' ability to do wonders in their presence.

Next He sends the disciples out to teach. Was it because He'd just been handed a lesson that not everyone would regard Him the way it might be expected? We don't know. What we do know is that He sent them out. The lessons of the seeds that He'd given them was now to be put into effect. The Word of God has potential to multiply itself greatly when sowed in the right soil, the right heart. Now it's their turn.

The hospitality culture of the day was strong. To refuse aid to a stranger was shameful. This might have been a measuring stick for the disciples. The "shaking the dust off your feet" wasn't in relation to how people received their message. It was in response directly to their hospitality. If they entered a village and weren't received, before even teaching, they left.

Why? Perhaps this was a test to whether or not the village was able to receive their message. If they couldn't even follow the deeply held custom of compassion on the stranger, how could they begin to grasp a new, even more radical idea of compassion and repentance? Their time was limited and so go to the places that were ready to receive.

Next comes an interesting interlude about John the Baptist. It shouldn't be a surprise that word of Jesus had reached King Herod, who was a ruler of the territory at the time. The disciples, or as Jesus now called them apostles (which simply means "one who is sent"), and their miracles and teaching would have only amplified Jesus' influence and impact.

The response of Herod and others reveals that they had superstitions at the time. They thought it could be John the Baptist returned from the grave or Elijah. Herod was convinced it was John. We know now that it was no mere prophet. Jesus is the Messiah leaving all others far behind. Herod and others did not. They let superstition, at least here, play into their heads.

The story of John's death shows us a few things.

It shows us the folly of grand promises. Herod had a fondness for John. In his likely drunken state at a party he makes a rash promise to his step-daughter. The result is that the man he had a love/hate relationship with was executed at his command.

It shows the depth of hatred a heart can hold. Be careful because those we anger can hang onto that grudge a long time. The offer was power and wealth up to half a kingdom. Rather than take it, John's execution was the request. Unchecked bitterness runs deep.

It shows the danger of standing up for what is correct. The hatred for John came from him calling out inappropriate relationships. Herod's marriage was shady. John criticized it openly. Even if John was right, Herod was the one with the power. Ultimately Herod wins. In his frustration he arrests John and then has to suffer the indignation of killing John because of his foolish promise.

After all of this the disciples share their stories and Jesus leads them to a deserted place. The "deserted place" or "wilderness" is a well understood image of preparation. Whatever they've just done the disciples need to prepare for what else is coming. They've been swamped and need a rest.

It doesn't work.

The crowd follows, Jesus does what He does and teaches. He goes long enough that it becomes meal time and everyone is hungry.

Rather than fending for themselves, Jesus tells the disciples to feed this enormous crowd. All they have is a little. Five loaves and two fish. Jesus encourages them to just start handing it out and at the end of it all there is so much that the leftovers fill twelve baskets.

Nothing is made of this other than the event. Then we are told in the boat after Jesus walks on the water that they didn't understand the loaves. They were stubborn. Dense.

What makes their denseness all the more confusing is that they just saw Jesus walk on water. Once again we see another nod to superstitions of the day. They thought He was a ghost. Which means that they believed in ghosts! Regardless they recognized Him, He calmed the wind and the waves (again), and was with them to the other side of the sea.

They have seen Him heal, exorcise demons, twice control the weather, and multiply food. Yet still they aren't getting the full picture.

Perhaps they just didn't get symbolism.

Often we call the Word of God the Bread of Life. When Jesus is involved, the impact of the Bread of Life multiplies beyond our comprehension. Our job is to simply believe and spread His message. Then when it takes hold in good soil it grows and spreads.

This extends the mustard seed parable. It's small to begin with but the potential is awesome. It grows beyond expectation. These loaves and fish were meager, yet they grew beyond anyone's wildest dreams. And it fed a multitude of people who were eager for it.

The ending scene is the opposite of the opening one. Crowds assemble yet again. They are looking for Jesus. Unlike His hometown, Jesus didn't come to them, they came to Him. And they came with faith and expectation. The result was that many were healed.

Often the woman with the issue of blood in the last chapter is cited as a sole example of faith beyond our grasp. She just touched His tunic and was healed. Her example isn't the only one. It is the first and poignant one. Mark expands this now by informing us that many did the same thing. They were sick, they touched his cloak, and their faith made them well.

May we have faith that helps us see beyond the surface, stand firm in the face of adversity, and receive grace where we might not expect it. May we have faith that helps us look at those we know well with hope when they demonstrate that they are more than they were when we knew them. Who know what God has in store for them, or us?