

For God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, no longer counting people's sins against them. This is the wonderful message he has given us to tell others. 2 Corinthians 5:19

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## EVIL AND THE GRACE OF GOD

BY GORDON BALS

**IF WE ARE AIMING** to freely celebrate the reality of God's grace, it is helpful to recognize how evil pursues us and deceives us in an attempt to harden our hearts to God's kindness. One simple way evil works is to build a wall of deception between us and God's grace. By leading us to believe that God does not really care about us, evil supplies us with all the tools to build fortresses against grace. When I use the word evil, I mean the world, the flesh, and the devil. Author, David Powelson, says: "The epistles present moral evil as a three-stranded braid of the world, the flesh, and the devil. Our social situation feeds us a stream of beguilements and threats; our own hearts gravitate to lies and lusts; the devil schemes to aggravate sin and unbelief. Not only do the world, the flesh, and the devil appear in concert, but the Bible consistently presents them in a carefully crafted balance." Evil conspires to rob, kill, and destroy, while Jesus wants to give us life (John 10:10). Every good thing that happens in this world comes as a gift of God (James 1:17). Fundamentally, nothing in this life is earned. The Scriptures call human beings to one primary posture – humble receptivity. Our faith should be shaping us in such a way that humbly receiving God's kindness seems more natural.

To thwart God's mercy, evil pursues us and tries to make us believe that God is against us or that we are be-

yond his gentle reach. For example, one of the most heinous ways evil does this is through sexually abusing a child. I use this example not to shock, but to help you consider how evil has no mercy – not even on a child. The perpetrator (being led by the father of lies) first chooses a child that is vulnerable. A classic perpetrator will prey on a weaker person (be that physically and/or emotionally) who has already experienced an inordinate lack of nurturing and protec-

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tion from the adults in their life. In the absence of good care, children are naturally hungry for someone bigger to pay attention to them. Initially, the perpetrator will shower the child with gifts and attention to arouse their heart and facilitate a closer bond. The child is enticed into this relationship, and at the right time, the perpetrator will violate the very trust they engendered. The child is caught in a trap and thinks, "How can someone I needed, who was kind to me and nurturing, violate me? I must have done something wrong." Even worse, a child's body (because evil wants to mock God's creation) responds physically to the evil touch

and often may feel "pleasure" during abuse, further contributing to their confused thoughts that the violation is something they wanted to happen. If the child enjoyed bonding with the perpetrator before the violation, and her body responded during violation, she often ends up concluding that she wanted the abuse to happen.

In essence, the child begins to believe she encouraged and even longed for evil. Satan will be sure to whisper more deceptive thoughts along the way, such as, "How could you make that good person (the perpetrator) do something bad?" The end result is that a vulnerable child now believes she is evil or demented, and certainly undeserving of kindness. In addition, the child now begins to assume that looking to someone bigger to care for her is foolish. She thinks such trust would only lead to betrayal. Evil will find other ways to cement such a belief. Perhaps, right after being molested the child returns home in a state of shock, shut down, and afraid to talk about a violation she thinks she caused. As she walks in the door, the first thing that happens is the parent, unaware of the downcast look on their child's face, screams at her about being late for dinner. The child shuts down even more, and pulls further away from believing that there is someone big

who wants to be kind to her. This incident is followed up by similar ones, as evil attempts to help harden this child's heart to the kindness of God.

Perhaps years later this same child, I will call Susan, befriends someone in high school who actually begins to care about her. As they deepen their friendship, Susan, in a moment of vulnerability, opens up about some difficult event during the week. The new friend reaches out to Susan to comfort her and tries making contact by putting her arm around Susan. Reflexively, Susan pulls away, supported by thoughts such as, "How could someone so kind reach out to someone like me? Don't touch me. I am contaminated and beyond kindness." Her friend may find Susan hard or distant, but Susan will not see herself this way. Pulling away from a friend's kind touch seems reasonable to Susan, given the context of her life, and she would probably not even notice the dismayed look on her friend's face. Thus, Susan would be reinforcing a self-reliant posture that rebuffed kindness.

This simple picture of a high school girl refusing a touch of kindness illustrates how, in cooperation with evil's pursuit of us, we can build self-protective fortresses against the kindness of God. Evil often pursues and deceives us in such a way that our hardness seems reasonable. The betrayal by a trusted adult in Susan's life causes her to shut down to kindness in general. It is easy for all of us to unknowingly move away from kindness because our flesh naturally moves in that direction. It looks for, and gravitates to, any situation that might obscure God's

kindness in our heart. When others fail us, evil will lie to us about what that specific failure means in general, and as we hold on to those lies, we begin to get immersed in deception. Although revealed truth would have us believe that nothing could separate us from the love of God, betrayals and failures in this world, combined with the deceit of evil, can contribute to our hardness of heart. All of us, like Susan, fall along a continuum of doubting God's goodness. We reflexively believe God does not want to let his healing touch be mixed with someone who will spoil it.

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It is proud to refuse God's (or others') kindness, when Scripture clearly says he wants to treat us like his very own children (Romans 8:15). That is why two of the major passages in the New Testament that deal with spiritual warfare (James 4:6-10 & 1 Peter 5:5-9) are preceded by this statement, "God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble." We grow in our ability to do "spiritual warfare" as we turn away from pride and toward humility. In a paradoxical way, self-hatred is a form of pride. Rejecting, hating, loathing, or mocking the creation (whether that is a friend, our family, or ourselves) is a rejection of the creator. We can take "pride" in our tainted condition by believing we are so bad (unique) that we are out of God's reach. The Lord will use whatever is at his disposal (which is everything) to draw us to himself.

We all push away such "gifts" like compliments from a friend, or the chance to relax, (yes, at times God is inviting us to be still and we find something else that has to be done). I have even seen several people turn down promotions at work because they did not have the humility to receive something they felt was beyond them.

Humility is simply the willingness to follow the Lord along paths that confront our self-reliance and pride. Responding to kindness when we think we don't deserve it, have not earned it, or actually feel afraid of it, is humbly doing spiritual warfare. Susan, the high school friend with an abusive past, is humbly doing spiritual warfare when she accepts a vulnerable touch from a friend that is meant to bless. To do so, she will have to, "Humble herself under the mighty power of God and give all her worries and cares to God, believing God cares about what happens to her" (1 Peter 5:6-7). Believe it or not, as kindness pursues Susan, she will experience very real fears that she is being set up for abuse and not redemption. Vulnerably accepting kindness will feel very similar to vulnerably being abused; and thus, an instrument of healing (a tender touch from a caring friend) will be avoided. A prayer like this would help her: "Yes Jesus, I believe you love me and want to use my friend to help me experience your kindness. Give me the faith to accept and respond. Help me to step out in faith and follow your leading."

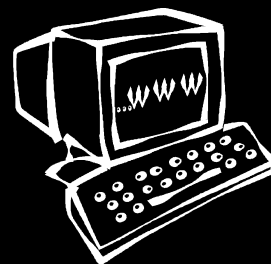
God's essential nature is love. He freely offers us kindness, not because we have earned or deserved it, but just because *He is kind*. But this type of kindness is offensive for humans, especially because we are so entrenched in faulty beliefs

about our condition and God's love. We are not unlike Susan. Although we may not have been sexually abused, we have experienced the fallen-ness of this world in such a way that we also harden to God's goodness. Evil wants us to believe Jesus' death was meaningless and that it does not really apply to us. Evil will use the people, philosophies, and institutions of this world to confirm the direction the flesh is leading us in, and he will personally look for opportune times to highlight his lies. Evil is small compared to God's kindness, but we need a little humility to respond to God's advances. Humility is our best friend in the battle against evil, because the kindness of God is so scandalous. His kindness will offend many of the decisions we have made at weak periods in our lives like; "I won't trust anyone" or "I will do it myself" and "I am not good enough for such and such." So I say simply, "Today when we hear His voice, let's not harden our hearts" (Hebrews 4:7). Let's cast aside the comfortable and proud fortresses we have built against a kindness we don't deserve, and step into the care of God. We will leave evil in the wake as we do.



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## UPCOMING EVENTS

### **EVERY HUSBAND FEELS LIKE A JERK... *and Every Wife Agrees***

Conversely, "Every Wife Feels Alone and Every Husband Leaves Her There". Join us for a Summer mini-series at Oak Mountain Presbyterian Church taught by Dr. Gordon Bals of Daymark Pastoral Counseling. He will teach on marriage, dealing with some of the regular lies couples face as they move towards a redemptive marriage. Gordon will discuss how these lies develop and the ways to combat them. Each session will stand alone, so you can come to all or part of the mini-series. Don't miss this opportunity to learn and grow in the gospel! Childcare is not provided so that couples have the opportunity to go out with each other or friends to discuss the material.

**SUNDAY NIGHTS, JULY 22 & 29 5:30-7:30 PM**

**COST: \$36 PER COUPLE FOR BOTH NIGHTS**

*(we can divide the cost as needed per person & per date attended)*

**REGISTRATION:** Call or E-mail Shelly Gentry at Oak Mountain Presbyterian Church

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