

Tyrone D. Gordon

Preaching and Teaching about Evil

Choosing to Respond with

Love

In the murder of my brother, I had to learn to respond to evil in positive and healthy ways, and that is how I teach others to respond. Vengeance breeds bitterness and only love can smother and conquer hate. I have learned that even in the midst of tragedy and evil, there is still God and God is still good.

One does not have to look any further than the events of the day to conclude that there is evil in the world. Evil's influence and hand are seen every day in terrorist attacks, in violence, in the volatile situations in the world, in our communities, in the fractured nature of human relationships, in hatred and intolerance of others, cross-burnings, discrimination, injustice, political unrest, oppression, racism, and sexism. We have seen evil with our own eyes. The question, then, is: "How can our congregations address evil and how can they combat and deal with these complex issues?"

Pulpits across the world will address this issue in different ways and understandings because of cultural and per-

sonal experiences. My understanding, my preaching and teaching, about evil is heavily influenced not only by my theological training but also by my cultural experience in the African-American church and the African-American community. My understanding is colored by my experience as an African-American in this nation. That experience has taught me in no uncertain terms that there is a

spiritual force at work in this world that is in total opposition to the work and movement of God. The Church must stand against that force, confront it on all levels—personal, societal, and institutional.

Evil is the fruit of the cosmic spiritual war that is being waged in the universe. There is an opposing force in the universe that is bent on destroying and thwarting all that for which God stands and advocates. The Apostle Paul writes in Ephesians 6:12, "For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."

Evil is everything that God is not. It

is the opposite of the God who is love, goodness, compassion, mercy, the lover of justice, truth and righteousness. It is seen in the chaotic events of the day and is played out in human decisions and actions. It manifests itself in war; it is seen in unjust political and economic policies that continue to disenfranchise the poor and oppressed; it is seen in the senseless violence on our streets and in our communities; and in racial and political strife. Evil also manifests itself in personal relationships and in the institutional life of religion, business and politics. This spiritual struggle is played out in our world order and in our human relationships.

The symbolic language that we use to describe and understand God is the same type of language that we use to describe and understand evil. We know that God and Evil are bigger and broader than our human understanding, but we use symbolic language to help us at least begin to understand. With that in mind, I think I would be safe in saying that most persons, not only in my congregation but in the community as well, would define evil in both personal and impersonal terms. We use the impersonal and personal titles and language to understand the bigger picture and influence that evil has in the world and in our lives. For my congregation, and for me, the two are interchangeable. As there is good, there is evil and as there is God, there is Satan or the Devil. Evil is both personal and impersonal. I use both types of images in preaching and both are well understood by all in my congregation and community.

Yes, there is the much broader issue of evil in our world and at the same time we can say, as did Jesus in the parable of the "Wheat and the Weeds," that an "Enemy" has done this! The enemy of God has sown seeds of hatred, discord, and injustice in the fertile fields of God's creation.

It is important that we name these powers of demonic destruction and challenge the people of God to confront, fight and resist their influence on all fronts. The people of God must forever be vigilant in the struggle against evil, and we must confront it in ourselves as well. It's so easy to see evil

in the universe but it is a struggle to see it in ourselves. We are the vessels and the perpetrators of the works of evil. We must resist the demonic influences that reside in the dark places of our hearts and minds. We are God's weapons against the plots and plans of ungodliness. We must call our congregations to take up our arsenal of weaponry, which are love, truth, righteousness, salvation and justice in order to fight the good fight of faith with faithfulness.

Tragic experiences such as 9/11 or the violent death of a loved one can provoke questions that still baffle the mind and challenge our faith. The murder of my youngest brother, Keith, some 14 years ago caused me to ask, "Why did God allow this to happen? Why do good people suffer? If God is so good, why does God allow evil to exist?" These are difficult things to answer and explain. However, our faith tells us that God allows evil to exist but God did not create it. Human disobedience, sinfulness and rebelliousness create and feed evil. They give evil life and power. The reality is that bad things do happen to good people; the righteous do suffer; and evil is an equal opportunity attacker!

However, God gives us the free will to choose between good and evil. God gives us the capacity to respond to the evil that happens in our life and the world in positive ways instead of negative ways. We have the choice to either respond with vengeance, retaliation and resentment or in love, grace, forgiveness, and mercy. In the murder of my brother, I had to learn to respond to evil in positive and healthy ways, and that is how I teach others to respond. Vengeance breeds bitterness and only love can smother and conquer hate. I have learned that even in the midst of tragedy and evil, there is still God and God is still good. We must be watchful so that we are ready to fight for right and take a stand against any and every attack of the enemies of God.

I preach that we ought to expect God's triumph over evil! Evil may speak loudly in the events that we are seeing unfold before our very eyes, but God will have the last word. There are no timetables when this will occur but it will take place in God's time. The

kingdoms of this world will become the kingdom of our God and the Lord's Christ and the Lord will reign forever and ever! Faith in the God of eternity helps us cope with the power of evil and it gives us the power to confront it and wrestle with evil whenever or wherever it shows its demonic face.

My faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ tells me that

- evil will not win in the long run,
- truth crushed to the ground will rise again,
- justice will overcome injustice,
- righteousness will overcome unrighteousness,
- peace will overcome violence and war,
- liberation will overcome any form of oppression, and
- love will overcome hate!

My faith tells me that God will right every wrong. My faith tells me that we will overcome some day! I am reminded of the words of a hymn popular in the African American Church, "Beams of Heaven" by Charles Tindley, who writes:

Harder yet may be the fight;
right may often yield to might;
wickedness awhile may reign;
Satan's cause may seem to gain.

There is a God that rules above,
with hand of power and heart of love;
and if I am right, he'll fight my battle,
I shall have peace someday.

(UMH #524, verse 3)

That is the kind of faith that gives us power and the spiritual resources to confront and combat the spiritual forces of evil that are so prevalent in our world today.

GOD WILL PREVAIL! □



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