



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Deliver Us from Evil

Dr. Jim Gilchrist

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And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil ... (Matthew 6:13, KJV).

Every time we say The Lord's Prayer we ask God to "deliver us from evil." But what does that mean? What is evil, after all, and how can we be "delivered" from it?

Not everything that people do wrong is considered evil. You can be fined for not putting enough money in the parking meter, or for driving a little too fast on the highway, but nobody thinks of those things as evil. And sometimes even things that are wrong in general can lead to evil if you *don't* do them. Somebody pointed out in our Bible study last week that lying is generally a bad thing, but when the Nazis came knocking on people's doors and asked whether any Jews were living in the house, evil would have come from telling the truth instead of lying to protect innocent lives. Tonight some of us will participate in the annual South Hills Interfaith Ministries Holocaust Observance, where some of the heroes of that story had to bend the truth in order to prevent a far greater evil.

Evil has to do with things that harm somebody, where people are responsible for the injury they cause, either by what they do or by what they fail to do. By that definition, there's been a lot of evil in the news lately.

Last week we heard about hundreds of people trying to escape war and poverty in their homeland and find a new life for themselves and their families in Europe, only to go down in the sea on boats manned by traffickers who meant to take their money but wound up taking their lives as well. In recent weeks we've been hearing a lot about ISIS and other groups that do horrible things to people in the name of God—people of other faiths, including many Christians, and

even people of their own Muslim faith who fail to pass their litmus test for what it means to be a true believer.

Those are just some of the stories about evil in places far removed from us, but there were other stories closer to home last week about sources that don't ordinarily come to mind when we think of evil.

There was an article in the paper about a program on cyberbullying, for the benefit of some 2,000 middle school students in several of our local school districts. The program itself sounded very good, but it was good because it was warning about a reality that can also be described as evil, though it involves young people doing awful things to other young people.

Cyberbullying is a large and growing problem made possible by social media in general, but now it's made even worse by anonymous apps available on the Internet. It's bad enough that people can shame and embarrass and humiliate other people online for all the world to see, but now they can do it without even being identified. And surely that's an evil thing, too. Inflicting unnecessary harm on people is part of the very definition of evil, and to hide behind anonymity while doing it is cowardly as well as evil. Decent kids know how hurtful that is, and how technology makes it so much easier. One thoughtful seventh grader said, "The online bullying can be meaner because you aren't showing yourself," and another pointed out that students do these things "because there are no consequences to their actions."

There are consequences, of course, but the perpetrators are not the ones who suffer the consequences. Any time people can do harm without feeling the results of their actions, the potential for doing evil multiplies greatly.

A few years ago, after the abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib made the news, a psychologist named Philip Zimbardo came out with a book called *The Lucifer Effect*. Zimbardo understood how soldiers and others could abuse prisoners under their control because he had seen it all before, in conditions that surprised and shocked him at the time.

Zimbardo set up a psychology experiment with students at Stanford University in 1971, where some of the students were asked to play the part of jailers and others played the part of prisoners. The experiment was to run for two weeks, as a way of studying how human behavior can adapt to different situations. But Zimbardo had to shut the experiment down after just three days, because by that time some of the jailers were already treating the prisoners so badly that some of the prisoners were suffering serious emotional trauma.

The striking thing about all this was that it was just an experiment, and all the participants were very bright students at an elite American university who knew they were just role playing. Zimbardo's conclusion was that it doesn't take much for ordinary people—even intelligent, otherwise decent human beings—to do awful things to other people, especially when they can wield some kind of power without having to feel the consequences of their own actions.

Zimbardo called his book *The Lucifer Effect*, echoing part of The Lord's Prayer that we say together every week. We say "deliver us from evil," but many translations of the Bible recognize that the original Greek can also mean "the evil one"—the one traditionally known as the devil or Satan or Lucifer. Like an awful parody of the Holy Spirit, who works in and through human beings, the spirit of the evil one also

works in and through human hearts.

In Jesus' parable of the wheat and the weeds, the servants ask their master, "Where did these weeds come from?" and the master replies, "An enemy has done this." When Jesus' disciples, as usual, don't quite get the point, he explains that the enemy is the devil and the weeds are "the children of the evil one"—that is, those who give in to the temptation to evil.

Today, two thousand years later, we still want to know, "Where did these weeds come from?" Who or what is responsible for all this evil in the world?

The easiest way to answer that question is to focus on other groups who do conspicuously evil things: the Nazis who perpetrated the Holocaust, the human traffickers who profit from people's desperation, the misguided zealots who do horrible things in the name of God. Certainly those are part of the answer, and when we pray to be delivered from that sort of evil much of what we're asking, typically, is that God might keep such things far from us and the people we love.

But that's only part of the answer. The truth is that some of the weeds of evil grow up in the hearts of ordinary people, too, including our own and those around us. As Zimbardo and others have shown, it doesn't take much for otherwise decent people either to participate in evil or to acquiesce in it. When even middle schoolers can do terrible things to other kids, just because they can get away with it, the evil we need to be delivered from is not just "out there," but "in here" as well—the seeds of temptation that lie buried within each human heart.

The Bible tells us that we are responsible for the things we do and for the things we fail to do, for the harms we commit and the harms we permit, if we could do something to stop them. Jesus says, in the parable of the sheep and goats, that he will ask what we did when the least of his brothers or sisters was hungry, or naked, or sick, or a stranger, or in prison; and the difference between the sheep who are saved and the goats who are not will be whether they acted in love or acquiesced in indifference, which, according to Jesus, is just another form of evil.

When the servants in the parable of the wheat and the weeds ask whether the master wants them to harvest the crop to get rid of the weeds, the master says no. He wants to wait until the wheat is mature and then gather up the wheat into the barn and cast the weeds into the fire. Some people today think the world is so full of evil that they wonder why God doesn't just put an end to the whole thing now. Apparently they wondered the same thing when Jesus told his parables, and the answer, then as now, seems to be that God is still waiting for more souls to be redeemed.

Jesus says that in the end God will collect all causes of sin and all evildoers and throw them into the fire. Do you hear the distinction there: all *causes of sin* and all *evildoers*? Those are not quite the same things.

If some people's souls are so evil that they turn into nothing more than evildoers, then there may be nothing left in them to save, come Judgement Day. That would be a truly terrible thing to see.

But besides the evildoers, Jesus also mentions the causes of sin, and the causes of sin are much more subtle and far more pervasive, aren't they? Some of those causes

are the seeds of inclinations in each of our hearts, like the weeds that grow among the wheat or the dandelions sprouting up already in our yards. If we really love God, we will want those weeds to be done away with, too. We will want God to take away our bent to sinning, as the old hymn says, and let only the good seed grow until it characterizes all that we are and everything we do.

This month is the 150th anniversary of the end of the Civil War, and next month marks the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II in Europe. In each case, the world was delivered from some great evil—slavery on the one hand and nationalistic genocide on the other—but we would do well to remember that both of those evils were perpetrated in no small part by people who called themselves Christians.

There have been other great victories over evil on a grand scale, from totalitarian communism to apartheid and segregation. For all those occasions of deliverance we give God thanks and praise, and we celebrate those human beings whose courage and sacrifice became instruments of God's own purposes.

Today, of course, we continue to face great challenges all around us, and there will always be challenges within us, too. So when we pray the prayer that Jesus taught us, let's remember that the line between good and evil runs not only between human beings, but down the center of every human heart. And then let us trust in the redeeming grace and power of God, and pray that God will deliver us from every form of evil, until God's kingdom comes and God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven.



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

2040 Washington Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15241
412-835-6630

www.westminster-church.org