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BEING NAIVE ABOUT EVIL

By Rick Liggin

It's really kind of funny when we run into someone who is genuinely naive about certain things. We sort of chuckle at this innocence, and may even poke a little fun at such a person. But even though being naive may be somewhat foolish at times, it's not always bad. There are some things that we need to be naive about, especially if we are Christians.

The apostle Paul urged, "but I want you to be wise in what is good, and innocent in what is evil" (Rom. 16:19). He means by this admonition that we need to be wise and experienced in those things that are good; but when it comes to our practical experience with evil, we need to be as naive as possible.

And there is certainly nothing wrong with that! Why is it that so many of us just have to experience things for ourselves--especially when it comes to evil? Why can't we be wise enough to learn from the bad experiences of others? You don't have to experience alcohol or drugs or sexual immorality in order to know how awful these things can be! We can know how bad these things are just by listening to the Word of God and the experiences of others who were not wise enough to avoid these evils.

Let's learn to be satisfied with our own innocence, and abhor that which is evil (Rom. 12:9)! Let's be glad that we're naive when it comes to experience in sin. There is nothing to be ashamed of in this! It is really the wise course to pursue! To choose the worldly path of practical experience is to choose the path that leads to self-destruction! Would you please think about that--and just choose to be naive? THINK January-February-March, 2001 Volume 32, No. 1

Resolving Our Differences

Jim Jonas

The NT gives various instructions on resolving situations so that they do not escalate or create deeper emotional issues such as bitterness or vengefulness. It is inevitable that we will be wronged by others, that we will take offense from words and actions that we deem sinful or callous or unfair. Life creates friction, and one of the tests of character is how we deal with such stresses. Consider the following passages:

First be reconciled to your brother – Mt 5:23-24. Jesus, in the Mosaic setting of bringing a sacrificial offering to the temple (a "gift," a free-will offering rather than a sin offering), contemplates the offerer being aware that "your brother has something against you." Jesus counsels immediate efforts to resolve the situation: "Leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled ... and then come ..." (5:24). Jesus doesn't say whether the "something" is legitimate, who is at fault or any other qualifier. But His directive prioritizes the settlement of disputes or hard feelings. Human nature tends to lead us in a different direction; i.e., to wait for the offended one to take the initiative: "Well, if Fred has a problem with me, it's up to him to come to me." This isn't what Jesus says, and such an attitude often leads to longstanding feuds and bitterness.

Go and tell him his fault – Mt 18:15-17. In a similar vein, Jesus describes a scenario where actual sin has occurred. But it is the one sinned against that He addresses: "Go and tell him his fault between you and him alone ...". It is the victim who is to be proactive, and it is to be done clandestinely so that the damage is limited and the guilty is not unnecessarily "outed," thus making it more difficult for him/her to be moved to repentance. But Jesus understands that such situations might not be easily resolved, so He advises escalating pressure upon the sinner by involving others and potentially the whole church.

Such instruction encourages us to make a careful evaluation of what has occurred and ask, "Is this truly a sin, or was it inadvertent or maybe just thoughtlessness? Can I just let it go, or is it serious enough that the soul of the offender is in

jeopardy?” These are serious questions, and they are not easy to work through. Again, the human tendency is to not address the matter head on but instead talk to others, carry a grudge and allow the offense to grow to greater proportions.

Do not let the sun go down on your wrath – Eph 4:26. Unmitigated wrath is volatile, corrosive, distorting and damaging to everything it touches. While there are righteous forms of wrath, and God Himself expresses divine wrath (picture Jesus driving the merchants and moneychangers out of the temple), we must be very careful not to let wrath take control of our thoughts and emotions lest it become a settled trait and poisonous to our relationships.

Colly Caldwell observes: “There is a sense in which anger is a justifiable, even righteous emotion ... It is true that the strong emotional response of displeasure with sin, hypocrisy, blasphemy, injustice, profanity, or tyranny is good for every Christian. We should become angry with sin ... It is sinful not to be incensed by evil. We would otherwise be sterile as Christians ... Even so, moderation and control are essential. A righteous indignation can easily be used as an excuse for sinful anger ... Paul said, do not become so angry that it causes you to sin ... We sin when our attitudes are marked by embitterment, irritation, rashness, or personal vengeance ... Any failure to reason, control, or forgive when aroused is sinful ... It takes great courage to control temper and overcome anger” (Truth Commentary – Ephesians 210-211).

Commentators note different Greek words which carry various connotations of anger: *orge*, *parorgismos*, *thumos* (all found in this section of Eph 4). They cover everything from wrath that arises from a sense of injustice to an emotional explosion over a trivial slight, from a long-standing grudge which through which everything else is filtered and distorted to a passionless, deliberate aim to destroy someone who has harmed us or someone we care about. But the bottom line is that we should seek control and resolution of these thoughts and feelings, not feed them and keep them alive in our memory so that they undermine our godly character.

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good – Rom 12:19-21. This is said in the context of blessing our enemies instead of seeking revenge against them. Jesus touched on this in Mt 6:43-48 where He repudiated the rabbi’s justification of hating one’s enemy. This world is polluted by the anger and hatred that fuels war, provokes murder, engages in slander, energizes riots and gangs and just about every kind of heinous sin imaginable. In essence Jesus says to His disciples, “You must break the cycle of bitterness and violence. See the value in others, even your enemies; love, bless, do good and pray for them” (6:44). Paul amplifies this in Rom 12, quoting from Proverbs: “Therefore if your enemy hungers, feed him; if he thirsts, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head” (12: 20). What does this metaphor mean?

L.A. Mott observes: “The expression seems to be used with reference to the burning pain of shame, remorse and repentance. It contains ‘a fine irony’ (Godet). The only pain which we are to inflict upon an enemy is through the wounds to his conscience brought on by our doing of good. This is the way a Christian ‘gets back at’ his enemy” (Thinking Through Romans 182-183). Mott then notes David’s treatment of King Saul when Saul was hunting him down. David’s sparing of Saul on two occasions brought the king to remorse, though regrettably it did not last. When we can’t resolve our differences with others, the best chance we have to bring them to their senses is to treat them better than they deserve.

I know of a couple of church situations where unresolved personal disputes have morphed into congregational issues. In one case the congregation, once vibrant and numerous, is now a shell of its former self; it’s membership is down to a handful. In another case a longstanding personal feud is threatening the eldership and beginning to spread to other members via gossip. This is why Scripture urges us to address wrongs, forgive, reconcile and heal. When the church fights like the world, it is no wonder unbelievers are repelled by the very rancor, ugliness and vindictiveness they see in their news feeds every day. God’s people must rise above this and truly practice their faith rather than simply talk about it.