

Sermon outline and notes © Dr. Stephen Felker, Pastor Emeritus
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Romans 16:19b-20a “Wise unto Goodness, Simple Concerning Evil”

Intro. This morning we will consider the subject of good and evil. We usually know evil when we see it, especially in its worse forms. Murder, violent abuse, hatred, robbery, and rape; these are clear manifestations of evil. Satan is the ultimate example of evil personified. On the other hand, goodness is seen in loving acts of kindness, in good works, and in moral purity. God is the ultimate example of goodness personified (Mk. 10:18).

From the fall of Satan there has been an intense struggle between good and evil. At the present time it seems that evil is winning out. Satan wants you to be the next victim of evil. In Paul’s day evil was ever present. The city of Rome was the center of much evil. Paul knew that such evil would seek control over the Roman Christians. For example, in vv.17-18 Paul warned of those who would seek to divide and destroy the church of our Lord Jesus Christ. Satan has indeed succeeded in bringing great harm to many churches through divisiveness and false doctrine.

Yet in spite of the rise of evil that we see, I have good news for you today. In our text we are assured that good will ultimately triumph over evil! Yet we do not have to wait until Jesus comes again to experience victory over evil. We can learn from our text how we can experience victory even now in this life. I believe vv.19-20 are among the greatest verses in the book of Romans.

We also will learn some important lessons about our attitude towards good and evil. Obviously, we understand that as Christians we should not practice evil. But less obvious is the fact that we should not even have a desire to *learn* about evil. That is an important aspect in preventing evil from having dominion over you. So let’s look into our text and see first of all that we should:

I. BE WISE AND PRACTICE GOOD

Paul says in the last of v.19, “but I want you to be wise in what is good....” “Good” (*agathos*) is anything that is “worthy of admiration, commendable,” hence, “good.” Originally it meant “good in the sense of what is advantageous, useful, or beneficial,” for ourselves or for others. Then the word was transferred to the moral sphere, what is morally good.

Furthermore, we are to be “wise” in what is good. The original Greek seems to suggest that we are to be wise with the result (*εἰς*) that goodness is practiced. In other words, true wisdom will lead you to practice what is good. In fact, by definition wisdom involves making good moral choices, and doing what is good. True wisdom leads to good conduct. James 3:13 asks, “Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom.” Then he says in v.17, “But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits....”¹

Every day you are confronted with choices between good and evil. Since we are sinners by nature, our default position is to choose sin. We need to gain enough wisdom to learn to choose to do good instead. One attribute of wisdom is that you consider the long-term consequences of your

¹ By way of contrast false teachers do not live according to Scripture. Titus 1:16 says, “They profess to know God, but in works they deny [Him,] being abominable, disobedient, and disqualified for every good work.”

actions. Evil can bring short-term pleasure but bad consequences in the long run. Those who are wise understand that you are much better off doing what is good.

Suppose you are standing and talking with a group of friends, and an acquaintance walks by. Immediately you are confronted with a choice between good and evil. You could yield to the temptation to slander that person or spread gossip. Or you could make the wise choice and do good by greeting them warmly and inviting them to join your circle of friends and participate in the conversation.

So let us then be wise both concerning what is good, and with the result that we practice goodness.

How then do we gain such wisdom? One source of wisdom that will lead to goodness is the written Word of God. Psalm 119:68 says of God, “You are good, and do good; Teach me Your statutes.” God will use His Word to teach you to do good. The book of Proverbs is a good source for wisdom. As you learn the Word of God, we are more likely to make wise choices. We also should pray for wisdom. According to James 1:5, we can ask God to grant us wisdom, including the wisdom to do good. Furthermore, we can be wise unto good by filling our minds with what is good. Philippians 4:8 says, “Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things.”

Why does God want us to be wise in what is good? It is because what is in your mind will reflect itself in your conduct. If a man is going to avoid evil habits, our text says that he is to have the right kind of thought life. And your thought life determines your character. Your character then becomes manifest in your conduct.

Next, Paul says:

II. WE SHOULD HAVE THE RIGHT RELATIONSHIP TOWARD EVIL

Until God eradicates evil from this world, evil will always be present. So how should we relate to the evil that surrounds us? Paul went on to say in the last of v.19 that we are to be “simple concerning² evil³.” Likewise, Paul said in 1 Cor. 14:20, “Brethren, do not be children in understanding; however, in malice be babes, but in understanding be mature.” In regard to the things of God, we are to have a mature level of understanding. But in regard to evil, such as malice, we are to be as innocent children, blissfully ignorant of such things. This means that:

A. We Are to Avoid the Knowledge of Evil - There are two different Greek words translated by the same English word “simple” in this context. In the last of v.18 a different Greek word (*akakos*) refers to the simple-minded person who is easily deceived; one who is naïve and gullible. But in v.19 the simplicity (*akeraios*) which is desirable is pure and unmixed (lit. meaning⁴) innocence, like that of a child who has yet to learn the evil ways of the world.⁵ Thus, we should *not*

² Here again, it is literally “unto” (εἰς) evil.

³ This translates κακός, which is not the stronger word for evil, πονηρός, which refers to seducing others to evil. κακός refers to malice or depravity. See 1 Cor. 6:8, where both words for evil are used.

⁴ Such as metal which is pure and without alloy, or pure wine not mixed with water (Barclay).

⁵ The word can mean “harmless,” as in Matthew 10:16, “Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves.” Paul may be alluding to this verse. Yet even here, purity may be the main idea, for the dove is a symbol of the Holy Spirit (Mt. 3:16, etc.) The only other occurrence of the word, found in Philippians 2:15, seems to carry the literal meaning.

be interested in learning about evil. This is one time when ignorance is good. Yet in our modern society you are looked down on if you are unsophisticated and unlearned about the latest trends, including what the Bible calls evil, or sinful. When someone finds out that you are ignorant of such evil, they make fun of you. God is saying here that He wants us to be unsophisticated and uncontaminated concerning that which is evil.

It is unfortunate that the age of innocence is getting younger and younger in our society. In the more distant past a person was at least 12 or 13 years old before they lost their innocence in regard to much of the evil in the world. Now children as young as five or six know quite a bit about immorality, profanity and many other expressions of evil. These days even children in grammar school know far too much about illegal drugs.

Based on the context, this instruction from God's Word includes both moral evil and doctrinal evil. The preceding verses have in view the divisions caused by false teachers (cf. 2 Cor. 11:12-15). They come along, claiming to have some new teaching. They make you feel that you are missing out on something if you do not learn from them. But often such people are seeking to introduce dangerous and corruptive false doctrines. We are not to seek to learn false doctrine that will lead to evil conduct.

You see, the devil appeals to the mind. He will play on your curiosity. He is the father of all lies, and he will mess up your mind with error. He knows that if he messes up your mind, he will mess up your conduct. Don't you recall his first temptation to Eve, when he said to her that if she would eat from the forbidden fruit, "you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:5b).⁶

There was a time in Israel's history that they failed in this regard. Jer. 4:22 says, "My people are ... are wise to do evil, but to do good they have no knowledge."

So you better watch out what you allow into your minds. We have to be careful what we read, or what we listen to, or what we watch. The devil tells you that you should be open-minded, but God tells you to be closed minded to what is evil! This means that we have no business seeking to learn about the occult and satanic rituals. You don't need to know the spells of witchcraft. You have no business going to some movie about demon possession or the occult. You have no business as a Christian learning about the latest moral trash that is coming out of Hollywood. We are not to seek to satisfy curiosity regarding what is evil. There are preachers today, who in the name of being relevant, frequently use illustrations from Hollywood movies that are full of filth. We Christians should not be ashamed that we can't carry on a conversation about many of the movies that are currently being shown today. Some people have learned about every form of sexual perversion. They know all about what LGBTQ and a bunch of other letters and number mean! Some people know 101 ways to cheat and steal.⁷ Some people know every illegal drug on the streets of our cities, and how to take them. But unless you are a law enforcement officer, you have no need to learn of such things, and the Bible commands the Christian to avoid such knowledge.

The Bible makes it very clear that sex outside of marriage is wrong and sinful. Sex is designed by God to be a sacred, special experience within marriage. So why do even children in grammar school need to learn about sex in the public schools? Why are they *even* being taught about homosexual and transsexual perversion in most public schools today? Why are "drag queens" displaying their sinful perversion even before children? We have done a great disservice to our children when we have helped to destroy the innocence that used to characterize children. Today we are raising a generation of children in America who know a lot more about evil than about the Bible. May God help us!

⁶ It seems that this text must be interpreted in light of Genesis 3:1-15.

⁷ Micah 2:1 says, "Woe to those who devise iniquity, And work out evil on their beds!...."

And you parents, you better be on guard as to what you allow into the minds of your children. If you don't control what your children watch on TV and internet devices, who will? The government won't. The advertisers won't. Most children do not have enough maturity to exercise self-control over their curiosity concerning evil. Today most children as young as 9 to 10 years old have a so called "smart" phone, which provides them the ability to learn about all kinds of evil, right in the palm of their hand! Children are being corrupted by Tik-Tok and a host of other media influences.

Let me tell you why this is important. The more people learn about evil the more likely it is they will *do* evil. A 2004 study by the RAND Corporation and the University of California found that, for children ages 12 to 17, those who watched a lot of racy TV were twice as likely to start having sexual intercourse as those who watched very little. That's not surprising. Some cartoons are filled with occultic themes, but a 6-year-old child will not understand that they are learning about evil.

So how are you going to respond to this appeal of God's Word? Are you going to reject the appeals of the world to learn about its evil? And the next time the world makes fun of you for not knowing the evil ways of the world, you just turn away from their jeers and look into the face of God, and imagine Him smiling down on you from heaven.

Now even though we are to be simple concerning evil,

B. We Should Be Wise in Being Able to Discern Evil – I base this on the last of v.18. There we read of false teachers, who "by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple." If we are going to avoid being deceived, we must not be "simple" or "gullible," but able to discern evil. Furthermore, if you are going to do good, rather than evil, you need discernment. The hijackers who killed over 3000 people on 9/11 thought they were doing a good deed for Allah, but instead, they were doing evil. They did not discern the difference. In fact, Jesus warned His disciples in John 16:2 saying, "whoever kills you will think that he offers God service." Instead, they were murderers like the devil.

You should understand that both good and evil exist in the world. The knowledge of good and evil came with the entrance of sin. When new life comes to us, we are to develop an attitude of mind that will cause us to know and discern what is evil. The Holy Spirit within the heart of the believer is willing and able to teach us to discriminate between that which is good and that which is evil. Hebrews 5:14 says that the spiritually mature person is able "to discern both good and evil." Paul said in 1 Thess. 5:21-22 that we are to "Test all things; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil."

So we are to be simple and innocent toward evil but not gullible toward evil. How important it is for us to realize that sometimes evil things have a very innocent look. We must learn that often the deadliest things *look* the most harmless.

When Satan comes as a roaring lion (1 Pet. 5:8), he is easiest to detect. But when he comes as an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14), he is the most dangerous. There are poisons which look like spring water. A glass of such a poison, placed by a glass of clear water, will fool the eye. The two look exactly alike. If we are unwise, we will make decisions just based on appearances. So when you must make a choice, you must not come to a decision on the basis of appearances (cf. John 7:24). How often people say, "What's the harm in this?" They *see* no harm in it because they lack discernment, and are making judgments based on appearances. How many young lives have been wrecked because youth often have the idea that they must try everything once? No, you don't have to try experiencing what is evil. Have some discernment!

So how do we become discerning of evil, without *learning* of evil by personal experience? First, we can discern evil and avoid it by learning the Word of God. The Bible tells us what is evil and sinful, and it warns us of the consequences of evil. It is only in the written Word that we are going to find the absolute truth of that which is good, and discern that which is evil. You don't have to learn all about evil in order to discern what is evil. You just need to know the truth and what is good and right, and anything that is different or contrary to God's Word should be rejected as evil. Secondly, take the advice of older and more experienced people. Children and young people, God has given you parents and grandparents to guide you, and help you avoid evil. They have been around a lot longer than you. They not only should know the Word of God better than you, but they have made their share of mistakes, and they don't want you to repeat those mistakes. Furthermore, the Lord has raised up pastors and teachers in His church, that they may instruct us in the Word of God and warn us of evil.

Someone has well said, "A wise man learns by the experience of others. An ordinary man learns by his own experience. A fool learns from nobody's experience."⁸ The younger folks in my audience should learn from the experience and wisdom of your elders. If they tell you not to do something, you would do well to listen and give heed.

So we are to avoid the knowledge of evil, we are to obtain discernment to know the difference between good and evil, and furthermore:

C. We Are Not to Practice Evil - Satan continues to use the same method that he used in the Garden of Eden. He suggests that God is withholding something from you that will be fun, enjoyable, or even beneficial. He told Eve that if she would just eat the fruit, she would have the knowledge of good and evil. So he peaks your curiosity. He says, "Come on. Try it just once." He knows that usually you will do it again, and again, and again, until you are trapped! One drink of alcohol usually leads to many others. Try drugs once, and you could be hooked before you know it. Once you begin any kind of sexual immorality, you will probably be trapped into continuing it.

Someone has well said, "Sow a thought and reap an action. Sow an action and reap a habit. Sow a habit and reap a character. Sow a character and reap a destiny."⁹ For many, that destiny is hell.

If you are curious about evil, and learn about it, you are much more likely to do it. Then you will reap the consequences. But refuse it and determine rather to die than to give place to the devil, and there is nothing that can touch you. And Christian, you ought to be far more curious about learning new truths from the Word of God than leaning about evil.

If someone who hears these words knows that he has long been defeated by sin and that he had developed evil habits that dominate him, the only one way of deliverance is through Jesus Christ. And so that leads to my last point. In this text of Scripture Paul also shows that we should:

III. LEARN AND APPROPRIATE OUR VICTORY OVER EVIL

Paul wrote of this victory in v.20, "And the God of peace will crush Satan under your feet shortly." Both vv.19 & 20 are an allusion to Gen. 3:1-15. In v.15 God promised Adam and Eve that the seed of the woman would crush the head of the serpent.

That me warn you of something. The Bible predicts that in the last days evil will become worse and worse (2 Tim. 3:13). Jesus said that the love of many will grow cold (Mt. 24:12). Many

⁸ Found in <http://www.sermonillustrations.com>.

⁹ Nineteenth-century preacher G.D. Boardman.

churches that profess faith in Christ will become apostate (2 Th. 2:3). In fact, Jesus asked if upon His return He would find faith on the earth? (Luke 18:8). The restraints of evil will largely be removed (2 Th. 2:7) and lawlessness will abound (2 Th. 2:7-9). We are watching all of this happen right before our eyes. Thus we know that the return of Christ is drawing near. Yet in times of such darkness, we are assured that Christ will have the ultimate victory over Satan and evil. Goodness will prevail. Again, we are assured in v.20 that “the God of peace will crush Satan under your feet shortly.”

I want to share several truths about this victory over evil we can and will have. First of all:

A. Victory Was Secured by the Suffering of Christ – How will this victory come to pass? Here again, this is an echo of Genesis 3:15. Men first heard the Gospel by overhearing it spoken to the serpent. But in this curse upon the serpent there is implied all victory and deliverance for man and the glory and the triumph of God. “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.” Pertinent to our study are the two facts concerning the bruising of Satan’s head and the bruising of Christ’s heel. From that point on the devil tried to kill the line of the Messiah to prevent this from happening. Genesis 3:15 foreshadows the cross, where Christ would be bruised by Satan. On the cross Christ suffered the penalty of sin, and He made possible victory over Satan and evil. The word for “bruise” used in the Garden of Eden (*shuf*) comes from a primitive root that conveys the idea of an animal leaping on its prey, so the word took on the meaning of bruising, crushing power.

So now Adam learns that he is not to be destroyed but that somehow there is to be a warfare that will end in triumph. Adam believed the promise of deliverance; and turning to his wife, he gave her the title of Eve, mother of all living at a time when she was the mother of no one. It was then that God gave them garments made of the skins of animals. May I suggest that they could well have been the skins of lambs, for it was *as* the Lamb of God that the seed of the woman would be crushed, and it was *from* the Lamb of God that they would receive their deliverance?

So from the first pages of the Bible the double bruising was announced. We come down to the prophecy of Isaiah, where we read that the Messiah would be bruised. In Isa. 53:5 it says, “But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him: and with his stripes we are healed.” The Hebrew word for “bruised” used in Isaiah (*daka*) comes from a root meaning to be broken in pieces. The great chapter in Isaiah goes on to say, in v.10, “Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise Him.... When You make His soul an offering for sin....” Here the same terrible word for “bruise” is used. Jesus paid the debt of sin to the justice of God (Rom.3:26) as the nails were driven through His heels and hands.

So because of what Christ has both done and promised:

B. Satan Will Be Crushed – The word translated “crush” (*suntribo*), means “to crush, break in pieces, trample underfoot.” The KJV uses “bruise,” probably based on an allusion to Gen. 3:15.¹⁰ But that is too mild of a translation. The day is coming when Satan will not be the victor over us, but rather he will be crushed under our feet!

This reminds me of the days of the Gladiator contests. They would be involved in a life and death struggle. At last, one would gain the victory over the other to the point that his opponent would be under his foot as a defeated foe. Even so, we can and will have the ultimate victory over Satan some day, and he will be defeated and crushed under our feet. Aren’t you looking forward to that day?

¹⁰ A different Gk. word is used in the LXX, but the Hebrew word can be translated “crush.”

What has the power of Satan become since Christ died? Barnhouse (p.166) tells of a small child occupied with a little toy balloon. When it had no air in it, it was a small thing that could be hidden in the palm of the hand. When it was blown up it was a frightening thing, with a devilish face painted on the side. Suddenly it exploded and all that the child had in his hand was a messy little bit of rubber. The child attempted to stretch this out, but it had lost its power to frighten. It reminded me of what had happened to Satan when Christ died. We can thank God that Satan was effectively defeated. He has no power over the child of God. His overblown balloon burst, leaving him nothing but the messy remains of his grinning pretensions.

C. Christians Will Share in this Victory - I would expect that Paul would have written this differently. He could have said, "And the God of peace will crush Satan under the feet of *Jesus*' shortly." Instead, he will be crushed under *our* feet! That means we shall participate in this victory!

But this promise of victory over Satan and evil is not just for the distant future. While total and lasting victory is yet future, we can experience victory over Satan now in this life, for he is already a defeated foe. Whatever our problems and whatever the force of the battle which opposes us, we are assured of the victory. Rom. 8:37 says, "...we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us."¹¹

In the life and experience of all true believers, Satan is a defeated enemy, and may be so accounted, if we take our true position by faith. If you are defeated by Satan it is because you have not been willing to reach out and take the power that is available to us. James 4:7 promises, "Resist the devil and he will flee from you." Though Satan would like you to believe that he has the power over you, the fact is, the believer has power over Satan! Resist him, and he will flee. Wouldn't you like to have such power over someone who tries to rob you, or do you harm? Well that power, and that victory over Satan is available to every believer. This victory is not obtained by your own strength, but by virtue of the victory and strength of the Lord. Eph. 6:10 says, "Be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might."

Furthermore, here in our text we read about the fact that:

D. Victory Shall Be Consummated - Our text is a great announcement of what is to take place at the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. At His return the kingdoms of this earth shall become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ. And praise God, Satan will be totally defeated. Rev. 20:1-2 says, [read]. Then v.10 says, [read]. What a glorious day that will be when Satan will be totally defeated, and forever removed from us, and cast in the lake of fire. All evil will be removed with him. Now it doesn't say who will cast Satan into the lake of fire, but I believe that Jesus Christ will have the honor of doing so. Though Satan is powerful, Jesus is the Almighty Son of God is far more powerful, and He will have the power to seize him, and cast him into hell, and it will not even be a good fight. Jesus will deliver the knock-out punch in the first round. And all the saints and angels of God will rejoice and praise God.

When will this take place? It will be done "shortly." This is according to God's timetable, not ours. However, that "shortly" is getting very close, I believe. In the meantime, we are to be faithful to God. Let us be wise and do good, and let us be innocent and pure in regard to evil.

Conclusion: I read about World War II and Hitler. Hitler decided that he would conquer the world, and by his scintillating ability to speak, he inflamed a nation. Millions of people lacked

¹¹ Jesus said in Luke 10:19, "Behold, I give you the authority to trample on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall by any means hurt you."

discernment and were deceived by this evil man. Millions of people followed him into the terribly destructive and deadly World War II. He directed the murder of millions of Jews, and his foolish minions carried out his orders. The end came for Hitler and he wound up in a bunker in Berlin where he committed suicide. Before he committed suicide, he sent a wire instructing that Goring, his second in command, was to be replaced by Grand Admiral Doenitz. Doenintz wired back these words, "My Fuhrer! My loyalty to you will be unconditional." The fool didn't even know that by the time he sent these words, Hitler was already dead and defeated. He had chosen a loser and didn't even recognize it.

That is exactly what happens when people chose the devil and evil against the Lord Jesus Christ. You have chosen a loser. Jesus declared that the prince of this world is judged (John 16:11). It's just a matter of time before the devil is utterly defeated. There are many souls who need to get off the losing side to the victory side. Get off the devil's side onto Jesus' side. The ultimate victory belongs to God and those who believe in Him and follow Him.

Christian, how far have you grown? What level have you reached in spiritual development? What victories over evil have you won? From what evils have you discerned and turned away from? What good have you achieved? We were created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God has ordained that we should walk in them (Eph. 2:10). Go on, become wise to that which is good and leave evil behind you.

Sources: Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Expositions of Bible Doctrines Taking the Epistle to the Romans as a Point of Departure*, vol. 4, "God's Glory" (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964); F.F. Bruce, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963); Hershel Hobbs, *Romans: A Verse by Verse Study* (Waco: Word Books, 1977); Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950 reprint); John Murray, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:80] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2021); A.T. Robertson, *New Testament Word Pictures*, Vol. IV (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1931, accessed through *Online Bible*); Charles R. Swindoll, *Swindoll's New Testament Insights on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010); Jerry Vines (notes from sermon tape of 7/14/74 entitled, "The Origin, Operation, and Overthrow of the Devil"); Kenneth S. Wuest's *Word Studies From the Greek New Testament*, Vol. 1, Romans (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1955). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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