

WHY THERE ISN'T MORE EVIL

UNDERSTANDING THE TIMES 8



T. M. MOORE

A REVISION STUDY FROM
THE FELLOWSHIP OF AILBE

Why There Isn't More Evil

Why There Isn't More Evil
T. M. Moore
Susie Moore, Editor and Finisher

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Welcome to *Why There Isn't More Evil*

“If God is so good, why is there so much evil in the world?”

Perhaps you've heard that objection? It's a fair question, but not nearly as fair as the question, Why isn't there actually *more* evil in the world?

People are self-centered, materialistic, and prone to take advantage of others. It's just the way things are in our evolutionary and secular age. So why isn't the world redder in tooth and claw? Why is there yet so much good in the world? So much that is decent, caring, compassionate, generous, and beautiful?

The answer is because God restrains the evil in the human soul, and He does so through the lives and work of His people, as they labor in the field of the world and their own Personal Mission Fields. In this brief study, we will explain how God keeps evil in check, so that the tares of wickedness do not overrun the good seed of the Kingdom.

ReVision studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We're happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 The Great Restrainer

And God said to him in a dream, "Yes, I know that you did this in the integrity of your heart. For I also withheld you from sinning against Me..." Genesis 20.6

So many tares, so little evil

A question arises as we work to understand our times concerning the decency, goodness, and beauty which every day confront us. Our secular age is a generation in flight from God (Rom. 1.18-32). They have embraced the gods of self and happiness, are driven in life by narcissistic and materialistic self-interest, have thrown off the Law of God and its counsels for liberty and love, and are rushing pell-mell toward some calamitous ruin of the planet and all its inhabitants.

We don't have to look very far to see that the tares of rebellion and unbelief are everywhere being sown, taking root, and flourishing. Sin, corruption, wickedness, oppression, abuse, destruction, misery, and death are so common, that we can easily become inured to them.

So we might wonder, Why, given that the tares are so many, and so widely dispersed throughout the field of the world, isn't there *more* evil than is presently in evidence? Why does so much of what is good, pleasing, happy, decent, loving, generous, compassionate, and edifying exist *at all*?

As we work to understand the times, we need to answer this question, so that we may be encouraged to get on with doing what needs to be done in sowing good Kingdom seed into the field of the world.

Side bars of insight

It is often the case, when reading Scripture, that, as we are straining to discern the main point of a passage, we can miss important "side bars" of insight. As in the story of Abraham and Abimelech.

The king of Gerar welcomed Abraham and Sarah in his domain, and abruptly decided he might like to add Sarah to his harem of wives. Abraham, in order to save his own skin, had explained that she was, after all, just his sister, so Abimelech saw no harm in bringing her in and preparing her for marriage.

But God intervened to preserve Sarah's purity and keep the covenant line unspoiled and secure. The *main* point of this incident is that God is able to rescue His people from their own folly, to fulfill His intentions and keep His economy advancing. The sovereign power and grace of God, here extended even to an unbeliever, seems to be the main point of this story. And so it is.

But there is more.

God's restraining love

One of the persistent objections to the Gospel of Jesus Christ proceeds along the lines, "If God is good and all-powerful, then why is there so much evil in the world?" That's a fair enough question, but it's not easy to answer. Indeed, theologians as accomplished as Augustine and Edwards have tried, with unsatisfying results.

But a different approach to that objection might be more effective. Rather than try to answer the question to the inquirer's satisfaction – which rarely occurs, and which most who pose this objection aren't really seeking anyway – why not instead turn the question in a different direction? I would suggest that we explain, this is not really the proper question. The proper question is not, Why is there so much evil in the world? The proper question is, Why isn't there *more* evil? After all, given the essentially selfish nature of every human being, the dominance of self-interest in the heart of every person, plus the rewards that can be so very

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pleasant in doing whatever one wants and can get away with, and this within the framework of a worldview grounded in the struggle for survival, the vulnerability of the weak and innocent, and the relativism and narcissism which everywhere cloud the issue of right and wrong – why, indeed, is there not *more* of wickedness and evil in the world, rather than any at all?

The answer is revealed in our text: God, in His grace and compassion, even toward those who do not know or regard Him, *restrains* evil, and prevents people from doing everything their wicked hearts can imagine, even though they may not regard their intentions as wicked. And wasn't Abimelech happy that He does?

After all, since most people in the world seem to be relatively free from, or, at least, able to cope with the evil of the world – though they are always wary of it – we should explain that only a worldview established on grace and truth, which arises from a source *outside* sinful men, and which advances an economy of love for God and neighbors, can ensure that evil will never be as potent or destructive as it might be. God loves His world, and He loves even His enemies. By many means, and in countless everyday situations, God is at work in the field of the world, restraining the growth, spread, and infection of tares, to the advantage of wheat and tares alike.

In a worldview grounded in chance, committed to the survival of the fittest, and driven by an ethics of relativism, narcissism, and power, we should expect evil to advance continually and exponentially. But when we understand our times in line with the teaching of God's Word, we see a totally different perspective on our secular age, one that should encourage us to do our work joyfully, expectantly, and to the glory of God in all things.

For reflection

1. Why does it make sense, from the vantage point of a secular and evolutionary worldview, to expect that there should be *more* evil in the world than at present?
2. What are some examples of things good, true, beautiful, helpful, uplifting, edifying, and so forth that you encounter every day? Should we take these for granted? How should we respond to them?
3. We note that it was a *word* from God that restrained Abimelech from adding to the evil of the world. Does this help us in thinking about how God might restrain evil in our Personal Mission Fields? Explain.

Next steps – Conversation: Why isn't there more evil in the world? Try that question out on some of your unbelieving friends or co-workers, and listen carefully as they respond.

2 Sin in the Service of God?

And the LORD said to Satan, "Behold, all that he has is in your power; only do not lay a hand on his person." Job 1.12

The devil's in the (good) details?

In a recent discussion on the subject of sin and evil, I made the passing comment that the devil was the servant of Christ. I was intending no more than what Augustine said when he wrote that God has the devil and his minions on a leash, so that they may only go as far and do as much as He approves. He allows spiritual forces of wickedness to continue to influence and affect matters in the field of the world, because He makes use of them for the purposes of His economy and glory.

That immediately raised a question in one person, who was upset by the thought that he and the devil might somehow be on the same side.

I reassured him by explaining that the devil does not serve Christ *willingly* and *gladly*, but *inevitably* and *begrudgingly*. Indeed, he could not continue to exist apart from the good pleasure of Jesus Christ, Who upholds the world and everything in it by His Word of power, and according to His purposes and glory.

And so, since Jesus allows the devil to exist, even he must have some place and purpose in the divine scheme whereby God is working *all things* together for good for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose (Rom. 8.28).

The devil cannot go anywhere or do anything to sow the world with evil tares, apart from the sovereign consent and irresistible will of King Jesus. Even the devil himself, the very embodiment of evil, though he invades all the details of life, is restrained by the good pleasure of God.

Joseph understood

Joseph understood that God can use even wicked intentions and deeds to accomplish His good purposes. He was treated cruelly by his brothers, then by his Egyptian master. Jealousy, anger, cruelty, injustice, reckless endangerment, lies and deception – these are all patently evil works, inspired by the prince of evil himself.

Yet God was using all this evil for His own good purposes, as Joseph understood, if only in retrospect. As his brothers contrived a lie to cover their bases and ensure their own wellbeing, yet Joseph rebuked them lovingly: "Joseph said to them, 'Do not be afraid, for am I in the place of God? But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive'" (Gen. 50.19, 20).

Certainly this does not exculpate the devil, nor anyone who commits evil, simply because God is able to use their evil for good. Paul strictly warned us not to do evil, excusing our doing so since it all works out for good anyway (Rom. 6.1, 2). The devil, we know is capable of a great deal of evil. Not just the gory, head-spinning, projectile vomiting evil that Hollywood delights to portray, but the more garden variety evil: deception, lies, gossip, malicious injury, indifference to suffering, adultery in all its forms – indeed, all the many ways that people break the Law of God and subject themselves to the ravages of disobedience and sin. And while God can use any and all such wickedness to accomplish His holy and good ends, those who knowingly engage in such evil cannot expect to know the fullness of His favor.

The devil's resources, the Lord's tools

In addition, the devil has a wide range of resources at his disposal in a world fallen in sin and subject to corruption in all its forms, to make life miserable for a good many people. And he delights to use those

resources liberally, as witness the story of Job.

The devil brought every available resource to bear on breaking Job and leading him to curse God – weather, thieves, even his wife and friends. The devil could not be satisfied to strike this holy man; he wanted Job to be more miserable, and more miserable still. But God restrained him, and used his wickedness and resources as tools to bring Job through to a deeper and more joyous relationship with Himself (Job 42.1-5).

As surely as God restrained and used the devil in the days of Joseph and Job, the Lord Jesus restrains him even more tightly today. For as we read in Matthew 12.22-29, Jesus has bound the devil, limiting his power to roam and devour, and making him subject to whatever the pleasure of King Jesus is willing to allow. He may delight to persecute and torture the followers of Jesus, but Jesus allows him to do so to strengthen our faith and increase our joy, hope, and witness (1 Pt. 4.12-19; 1 Pet. 3.15). The devil rejoices in tragedy and violence, but Christ can use even such horrors to advance His Kingdom and its economy of love (Lk. 13.1-5).

If Jesus did not restrain the devil, and make him serve only God's Kingdom purposes, count on it, there would be much, much more evil in the world than is presently the case. If we understand this about our times, then we will never allow the presence or experience of evil to discourage or defeat us. Instead, every manifestation of evil, and every trial to which we are subjected, will merely prompt us to wonder in our souls about what marvelous good thing God is preparing to do.

For reflection

1. How have you experienced bad circumstances ultimately working out for good in your life?
2. God allows evil, but He is not the author of it. Who is? What is our role either in allowing evil's advance or restraining its progress?
3. We tend to think of the devil as shrewd and clever and devious, always one step ahead of his victims. But the devil is in fact the stupidest creature in all the vast creation. Why? How should knowing this affect our work in God's field?

Next steps – Transformation: Make a list of evil things happening in the world. Commit these things to God in prayer, telling Him that you know He is working all things together for good for those who love Him, and giving Him thanks for the evil He allows to come into your path.

3 The Self-Restraint of the Saints

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. Romans 12.21

The restraint of evil

We're making the argument that the question, "Why, if God is good, is there so much evil in the world?" is the wrong question. Given the narcissistic, relativistic, secular, and materialistic temper of the times, the question really should be, "Why isn't there *more* evil than we see in the world today?"

The Christian understands that, by various means, God is at work in the field of the world, cultivating good seed and restraining the spread of bad seed. Were God to withdraw His hand of restraint, evil would proliferate like weeds out of control, and no one would be safe.

Evil exists in all of us, to some degree, and unless some means exist to restrain our evil inclinations, the world might finally realize the dog-eat-dog-red-in-tooth-and-claw promise of evolution.

But how does God work in time and human history to restrain evil, and even to make it work for His good purposes?

Overcoming evil

You won't get an argument with the person who objects to the Gospel by pointing to all the evil in the world, if you ask him whether he would agree that people are more or less evil.

That is, some people are really, really evil (Hitler, for example) while some people are really, really good (Mother Theresa, let's say). In between these opposing poles is a spectrum of good and evil, and everybody in the world falls on that spectrum at some place. Or, more likely, people move around back and forth along that spectrum, sometimes acting more toward the purely good end, and sometimes acting more toward the purely bad. There is a spectrum of good and evil, and the evil is so stark, and the good so obvious, that it would not be too difficult to reach agreement about where certain people or groups fall along that spectrum.

"So then," we might ask, "do you think it is possible for people who are prone to evil to resist their evil inclinations and do good instead? Can people keep their evil inclinations in check?" Most people would agree, recognizing their own ability to do so when they choose, and hoping, at least, that the same is true of others.

The question then becomes, "How do we do that?"

Certainly, if there is a way, not just to restrain evil inclinations, but to overcome evil with good, and if a worldview exists within which it is *more* possible for people to do so, then that worldview deserves a serious hearing.

And this is precisely the *claim* that Christianity makes, and the *way of life* it promotes in all its adherents. Christians are people who, when they practice their faith consistently, are able to recognize and resist the evil within themselves, and to overcome evil with good.

It's not hard to demonstrate this, for example, from the lives of a few well-known saints. St. Augustine turned from being a libertine wastrel to one of the great Fathers of the Church. John Newton abandoned the slave trade for the pulpit. Chuck Colson put aside his hard-core-take-no-prisoners life in politics to serve the last, the least, and lost in the prisons of the world. You could probably conjure up an example or two from your

own life.

It's expected

You see, the point is, it is *expected* of Christians, who have been forgiven of their sins and imbued with transforming power from God, that they should turn from wicked and sinful inclinations to follow in the path of goodness, kindness, and compassion. When we don't, or when we fail to live up to the good teachings of Jesus Christ, the world is quick to point out our hypocrisy, saying, "We expect more from you."

And it's precisely because, much of the time, this is how Christians *do* live, that there isn't *more evil* in their world than at present. Good works are *expected* of Christians, and more often than not, good works – rather than evil ones – are what the followers of Christ provide. Whether in the form of charitable giving, volunteering to serve others, taking care of the weak or needy, or merely providing a presence of affirmation and joy, Christians are a powerful source of good in the field of the world.

But this is no mere exercise of the will on the part of believers. Christians are not the little do-good engine chugging up the hill of temptation saying in their minds, "I think I can, I think I can, at any rate I'll try it!" No, the Christian possesses real *power* to resist the devil and to overcome evil with good. He turns to God in the face of temptation, and calls on the power of God's indwelling Spirit to transform desires, reshape thoughts, and adjust priorities, and to translate those inner changes into outward behavior in the form of good works of love. God is at work within sincere believers, with a power beyond human will or wish, willing and doing of His *good* pleasure (Eph. 3.20; Phil. 2.13).

No other worldview can demonstrate such a consistent, venerable, variegated, and proven record of good works, nor boast any power beyond human good intentions to help make the world a better place for all.

So one of the reasons there isn't more evil in the world is that there are a great many true and sincere Christians in the world, millions and millions of men and women who, though they may have formerly lived self-serving lives of evil and sin, are growing in the grace and knowledge of their Lord and Savior, and finding in Him the power to overcome evil with good.

For reflection

1. Christians are saved to do good works. They're not saved *by* good works, but they're not saved *without* them. Explain.
2. What examples can you cite of Christians who have turned from evil ways to follow Jesus in lives of good works? How have you experienced this in your own life?
3. How would you explain to an unbeliever what Christians do when they are faced with a temptation to do something evil?

Next steps – Conversation: How can Christians in your community be a force for good works together? Talk with some Christian friends about this question.

4 The Power of Influence

“You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden.” Matthew 5.13, 14

*Oh, that My people would listen to Me,
That Israel would walk in My ways!
I would soon subdue their enemies,
And turn My hand against their adversaries.
The haters of the Lord would pretend submission to Him,
But their fate would endure forever.* Psalm 81.13-15

Transforming presence

The problem that arises when a generation of Christians pursues a mainly *personal* faith, is that the *power* of faith to cause the goodness of God to flourish in the field of the world is stifled. Instead of rivers of living water welling up within believers and their churches, to overflow in all manner of good works in the larger community, believers become content merely to be happy in Jesus, and their churches become only a haven of safety against the growing presence of tares everywhere.

In such a situation – the situation in which we find ourselves in many parts of the Christian world today – Christians are content merely to enjoy worshiping together, fellowshiping with their Christian friends, and participating in programs and activities that demand little of them and accomplish little for the progress of Christ’s Kingdom.

Yet all the images Jesus held out to His followers were images of power and transformation, to encourage disciples to seek the Kingdom of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Spirit in all their relationships, roles, and responsibilities. Were Christians more active and more determined on Jesus’ agenda, rather than their own, we might see even *less* evil in the world than at present.

As it is, the Christian presence as salt, light, and leaven does exert a restraining power on the narcissistic and materialistic pursuits of our secular age.

Images of influence

We mentioned that the presence in the world of millions of true and sincere Christians, men and women who, in their personal lives, strive to live in goodness and love, means that there are just that many people who are *not* giving in to every wicked or evil thought or inclination.

The one who objects to the Gospel because it doesn’t answer well the question of why there is so much evil in the world must be asked to consider whether there might not be *more* evil if there were fewer – or no – people who believed the Gospel.

He needs further to consider the powerful effects such people have had over the course of human history. It is not without good reason that the Lord uses images of salt, light, and leaven to describe His people and their presence in the world. These are all images of influence, which by their very nature affect whatever is around them, making things better, brighter, and more wholesome and good by their influence upon them, and making even those who do not believe in God “pretend submission” to Him, for their own good.

Let’s look at just one example of the influence Christians can have in their world.

Wilberforce

William Wilberforce was a sickly, diminutive man of modest means, who lived in the early years of the 19th century. Wilberforce devoted his life to two causes: the abolition of slavery and the reform of culture and manners in England. No small tasks, those, especially since the British economy of Wilberforce's day depended on the slave trade, and the morals familiar throughout the cities of England can perhaps best be described as scandalous and cruel.

For the whole of his adult life Wilberforce shone the light of truth on the disgusting, degrading conditions in the slave trade, and the morals of the land. Acting like a moral preservative, like salt in pork, he drew others into his orbit and affected their lives for good. Not all the people who joined were Christians, or became Christians, but they saw in Wilberforce's passion and conviction a place where they, too, could make a contribution for good.

Gradually he developed a movement of like-minded friends, a movement which, like leaven in dough, spread throughout all of England and affected every city and town. The results were predictable: slavery was abolished and a moral revolution of national proportions swept England, ushering in many laudable moral and cultural improvements.

Wilberforce's story can be multiplied by myriads of other examples of believers from every age who, determined to be a force for lovingkindness and goodness, have overthrown tyrants, alleviated suffering, changed uncivil laws, rebuilt communities, and rescued millions from hunger, squalor, and other degrading forms of life.

By banding together and practicing service and persuasion, Christians by their influence have been throughout history a major reason why there is not more evil in the world. Our secular, narcissistic age needs such a movement of influential believers once again. Let us take up the mantle previous generations have worn, and strive to become salt, light, and leaven in our own parts of the Lord's field.

For reflection

1. How do salt, light, and leaven act in the material world to preserve and transform? Why are these good images for thinking as our calling to God's Kingdom and glory?
2. When such transforming agents do not exist, what should we expect in the field of the world? How can you see that this is precisely what we're experiencing in our day?
3. What does it mean for you to be salt, light, and leaven in your own Personal Mission Field? And if you refuse, or fail to take up this calling?

Next steps – Conversation: Talk with some fellow Christians about the life of transformation. How can believers encourage one another to think and living transformingly in their own spheres?

5 To Proclaim and to Persuade

For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. Hebrews 4.12

A powerful force

The presence of so many true and sincere Christians is a powerful force restraining the evil in the world.

In their own lives, such people strive to grow in grace and goodness, and are constantly vigilant against any evil that might seek to take root in their lives. They have learned the disciplines of overcoming evil with good, and are zealous and ready for good works as the Lord leads.

Christians work their sector of the Lord's field – their Personal Mission Field – with zeal for good works and conviction regarding God's truth, and thus bring more of the presence and fruit of Christ into every area of their lives.

Christians, their churches, and the various agencies engaging in the work of Christ have provided a powerful source of influence for good in various ways and at various times in history. No one can deny this, and the benefits enjoyed by many unbelievers today, as well as their relatively peaceable and decent lifestyles, is the direct result of the influence of Christians, past and present.

But what makes Christians so influential? Is it their skill at political organization? Inventiveness and creativity? Do they simply have more money and other resources?

The unchanging Word

The reason Christians are able to resist evil and to work for its containment and even eradication (as in the abolition of slavery) is that they are not governed in their beliefs or behavior by the changing winds of doctrine and morality that rule so many people in our secular age (Eph. 4.14). Instead, they stand on the sure foundation of the unchanging truth of God revealed in the Bible.

Throughout the ages, Christians have found the Scriptures to be a powerful force for affecting their lives and the lives of others for goodness and lovingkindness. As the followers of Jesus Christ have proclaimed the truth of the Bible and worked to persuade others of its reliability, they have wielded a power for good that helps to explain why there isn't more evil in the world. The Word of God is living and powerful, and when Christians faithfully wield it, by proclamation and persuasion, even the greatest powers on earth fall before its might (Ps. 149.5-9).

The power of the Word of God is such that it affects not only individuals for good, but whole cultures, societies, and times. As Rodney Stark and others have shown, much of what people take for granted today as good and useful about Western culture has its origins in the work of those who believed the Bible as the Word of God. People who were persuaded of the truth and reliability of the Bible proclaimed it to others and persuaded them to apply its teaching to their unique callings.

A legacy of proclamation and persuasion

Those whose worldview was grounded in the Bible laid the foundations for Western art, literature, music, education, economics, government, law, science, and more. Christians promoted literacy and universal education; built schools and universities; pioneered scientific knowledge and technological advance; wrestled into shape the forms of government that allow people to live in freedom under the rule of law; and created the charitable agencies and helping professions that are a source of good to millions every day.

Taught by the Scriptures, Christians in every age have been persuaded of the need to serve others with their lives and wealth. Why is it, for example, whenever a natural disaster shatters the lives of people, the most prominent agencies on site to relieve the suffering of the many are Christian? Where are the humanist organizations, Marxist clubs, and postmodernist philosophical societies when people are suffering and dying? Do not their own beliefs persuade them of the need to love their neighbors as themselves?

Christians come to the aid of the suffering, the poor and needy, and those who cannot care for themselves because the power of the Word of God, taught and proclaimed in churches all over the world, persuades them this is the right thing to do. Hence the importance Christians attach to preaching, teaching, reading and study, and meditation in the Bible. Here the power of God comes alive to transform hearts, minds, consciences, and lives. This is not just so much high-minded aspiration; it is demonstrable truth. The proclamation of Scripture persuades people to love their neighbors as themselves, thus holding in restraint the progress of evil in the world.

As Christians, taking seriously their calling to be witnesses for Christ, proclaim the truth of God to their unbelieving neighbors and friends, many are converted to Christ, forsaking their wicked ways and learning the paths of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Spirit.

And as they bring the teaching of God's Word to bear on matters of morality and public policy, explaining and persuading Biblical teaching for a wide range of areas, their influence grows and affects still more areas of life. It is not necessary for someone to *believe* the Bible as a source of wisdom and sound advice, as long as Christians can explain the merits of its teaching, and show the benefits society may expect to gain by submitting to God's Word.

Christian churches and organizations wax and wane, come and go. But the Word of God stands forever. And where that Word is proclaimed, and people are persuaded of its truth and reliability, the tares of evil will be checked and restrained, and good Kingdom seed will flourish.

For reflection

1. What do we mean by saying the Bible is living and powerful? Powerful for what? How?
2. Since every Christian is called to wield the Sword of the Spirit (Ps. 149.5-9), why is it important that we can some skill in proclaiming it and persuading others of its truth?
3. What is the role of a local church in proclaiming the Word persuasively within its own community?

Next steps – Conversation: How do you carry out the work of proclamation and persuasion relative to the Word of God? How might you improve in this? Talk with some Christian friends about these questions.

6 The Power of Prayer

The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. James 5.16

And the Lord said, "Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren." Luke 22.31, 32

State of the field

We have been working to understand that state of things in the Lord's field, where we are daily sent to sow good Kingdom seed by our words and deeds. Like Paul, preaching to the philosophers in Athens, or Solomon, counseling his wayward-leaning son, we want to understand the times in which we live, so that we might know better what we must do in serving the Lord and advancing His Kingdom in the world.

We know that the Lord's field contains many tares, and at times the tares can seem as if they own the field, and will soon enough make a tangled, worthless mess of it all. Christians can become discouraged and listless when this is their understanding of the times.

But the fact is, God is at work in the field of the world, as Creator, sovereign Lord, and Redeemer of the world. And He is at work in and through His people, in their Personal Mission Fields, to make sure that, when the final day arrives, the day of harvest, the field of the world will abound in much fruit to His glory and praise.

But the tares persist, and will until the end of all things. And the presence of so much evil prompts some people to doubt the existence of our sovereign and good God. What they should be wondering instead is, Why, in our materialistic and narcissistic age, there isn't *more* evil in the world. And the reason for this is that God *is* at work, converting people to Christ, growing and equipping them to bear fruit in good works, and using them to influence the way of things in the world according to His Word.

If we understand this about the times in which we live, we'll know better what we must do to make the most of our time for the progress of God's Kingdom. And certainly one of the things we'll need to spend much of our time in is prayer.

A powerful force

Over the years, prayer has been a powerful force for overcoming the effects of sin. Jesus Himself showed the power of prayer to restrain evil when He prayed against the devil's utterly possessing Peter, as well as when He turned to the Father to sustain Him through His great trial and suffering.

That prayer is a powerful force may not have any credit with the unbeliever who objects to the Gospel because of the presence of so much evil in the world. But, we might ask our friend to consider, since it is abundantly clear that Christianity itself has proven to be a source of so much good, and a force for overcoming evil with good, what it is about Christians that enables them to achieve such consistent effects?

We have already explained that the Bible is one such power for good. But it will also be important to help our unbelieving friend understand that, because prayer is so intimately and essentially a part of the life of every Christian, it is impossible to account for the Christian influence for good apart from prayer. Prayer has power for all kinds of things, including restraining the work and effects of evil.

Simply put, Christians believe in prayer, and many, if not most, of them practice it faithfully. In prayer Christians are invited to bring their most earnest concerns to God. He hears us when we pray, and will meet

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our needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus. This doesn't mean we will always receive from God precisely what we ask, but it does mean that we may expect to receive from Him exactly what is best for us and for His glory.

In prayer Christians seek relief from fear, anxiety, and suffering. In prayer Christians intercede for those who are in trouble, or sick, or experiencing anguish or distress. In prayer the followers of Christ seek the wisdom of God for practical ways of advancing His good and perfect will on earth. In prayer believers find strength to resist temptation, reach out to the unlovely, and show compassion for the needy. In prayer believers wait on the Lord to bring seasons of revival, renewal, and awakening to the world.

Coincidence?

Can it be merely coincidence that Christians are given to such prayers and practice prayer faithfully, and that, as a community, they stand in the forefront of those who have worked and sacrificed to alleviate and overcome the effects of evil in all its forms?

That seems unlikely, and for any unbeliever to pooh-pooh the power of prayer without understanding what prayer is, how it works, and what the practice of it promises and requires, is simply to remain a slave to the under-the-sun presuppositions of the day.

The effectual, fervent prayers of those who are seeking first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness have tremendous power to advance the goodness of God and thwart the progress of evil in the world. This world would be a far more violent, wicked, sad, and corrupt place without the prayers of faithful men and women interceding before the throne of grace for themselves, their neighbors, and the world as a whole. And this should encourage us as believers to give ourselves even more diligently, fervently, and constantly to this important work.

Why isn't there *more* evil in the world? Because, for one thing, Christians pray!

For reflection

1. In what ways are your prayers working effectually to restrain evil?
2. God does not always give us what we ask in prayer, but He always answers our prayers when we come to Him in faith. Explain.
3. How would you help an unbelieving friend understand the role of prayer in your life?

Next steps – Transformation: What can you do to bring more power, consistency, and effectiveness into your prayers?

7 The Restraint of Law

Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good. Romans 7.12

Law as restraint

One of the most basic functions of law is to restrain evil. Law codes prescribe conduct which, as it is obeyed, maintains order, fairness, and wellbeing in a society. Think of traffic laws. Who would venture forth in his car if there were no “rules of the road” defining which side of the highway people should drive on, how fast they may go, when it’s proper to turn or pass, and so forth? Bad drivers are everywhere; but think how terrible and frightening it would be to drive in the absence of any laws restraining the bad behavior of drivers.

Law has power to restrain evil. But law can itself become evil, especially when laws are crafted from an under-the-sun perspective and according to the changing whims and moral preferences of secular, narcissistic people.

In our society today, many things have become law which our forebears would never have countenanced, including abortion on demand, legitimizing marriage as anything other than one man and one woman, and many more. Such laws not only do not restrain evil, they encourage it, and thus provide fertile soil for tares of wickedness to proliferate in the Lord’s field.

No society can exist without laws. But law can work either for good or for evil, and only those laws which can be shown to be good can help to ensure that evil will be restrained.

American law and God’s Law

As we have seen, when English settlers came to the New World to carve homes out of the wilderness, they brought with them a tradition of law known as English common law. This was largely unwritten law, based on precedent and upheld by learned judges and skillful advocates for centuries. Much of English common law originated in the canon law promulgated under the authority of the Church in the Middle Ages.

Those laws, in turn, derived from the Law of God in Scripture – the Ten Commandments and the civil laws of Israel.

In the absence of sufficient trained jurists in the American colonies, lawmakers took to writing law codes. As we have seen, many of those codes were either based on or simply drawn verbatim from Biblical Law, and brought the neighbor-love of God’s Law to practical expression in colonial America.

But they also served to keep wickedness in check.

Put another way, when our forebears on these shores sought for ways to restrain evil in their new communities, they turned to law, and the law they turned to had its origins in the Law of God in Scripture. We have seen how the Law of God continues to exert effects on American law, and thus to restrain evil in our society. That the Law of God is included on the bas relief frieze above the entrance to the Supreme Court provides a permanent reminder of the importance of Biblical Law for restraining evil and bringing good to our society.

Still needed

This is still the case in America today, in spite of the fact that courts and lawmakers are working relentlessly to turn law itself into a “dynamic” or “progressive” entity rather than a fixed and unchangeable code.

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Laws against stealing, killing, attacking, and performing various other kinds of evil against persons have their origins, not in the enlightened minds of secular scholars or the observations of Darwinian biologists, but in the tradition of law handed down from our European forebears. No, they were not always consistent in using the Law, and, yes, they sometimes misused the teaching Scripture to support evil practices. But the various types of justice which law is intended to sustain and promote can all be found outlined and illustrated in the Bible. Even the requirement of a fair trial in the presence of witnesses is a Biblical principle of law that we consider to be a bare essential against all the various forms of evil.

The functions of law include restraining evil and overcoming its adverse effects, and the laws of Western societies have been erected on a foundation of Biblical statute. And if anyone does not believe that Biblical Law is a powerful restraint against evil, ask him to imagine a society where there are no constraints on human passion – where robbery, rape, lying, murder, slander, violence, and mayhem of every sort are merely tactical options, to be used with calculation and cunning, rather than punishable offenses against persons and society.

No one wants to live in such a place. Whoever protests that he can't believe in the Gospel because of the presence of evil in the world shows his ignorance of the power of Christian faith – including the Law of God – to restrain evil.

For reflection

1. Give some examples of how law restrains evil. Can you see how these examples relate to the Law of God in Scripture?
2. Christians today are not as well instructed in the Law of God as they might be. Is this a good thing? Explain.
3. Should Christians work to see the principles of justice, fairness, and order encoded in God's Law shape the laws of our land? Explain.

Next steps – Conversation: How can believers help one another to understand and practice the many benefits of the Law of God? Talk with some Christian friends about this question.

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Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Give some examples of how Christianity has been a force for good throughout history. What does this suggest about the impact Christians can have on culture and society?
2. How can prayer and the Word of God have greater influence in your Personal Mission Field?
3. How should local churches expect to affect the presence of evil in their community?
4. How does proclaiming the Gospel affect the moral climate of a community?
5. What's the most important lesson you've learned from this study? How are you putting that lesson to work in your life?

For prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe is a spiritual fellowship in the Celtic Christian tradition. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

The Fellowship of Ailbe offers many opportunities for training, prayer, personal growth, and ministry. Visit our website at www.ailbe.org to learn more.

We hope you found this study helpful. If so, please consider making a gift to The Fellowship. You can contribute to our ministry by using the contribute button at the website, or by sending your gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, 19 Tyler Dr., Essex Junction, VT 05452.

Thank you.