

Good Living in a Bad World

You are a Christian. You have committed your life to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. It is your heart's desire to do what is good and right in your life. But it's hard.

It's hard when your child is the victim of a schoolyard bully and the teacher doesn't seem to understand and the principal isn't sympathetic. It's hard when your neighbor's yard is a disaster and your house is up for sale. Weeds are growing, the paint is peeling and the stereo is loud twenty-four hours a day. When you talk to your neighbor about it he laughs and makes an obscene gesture.

It's hard when your rich brother gives you advice on an investment that turns terribly sour. You lose just about all your savings and he doesn't seem to care. To him it isn't that big a deal. It's hard when your boss is incompetent and you get blamed for things that you didn't do and for which you are not responsible.

It's hard when your father has molested you and when you tell your mother she calls you a liar. It's hard when your church abandons you when you've been loyal to the congregation for years. They don't care. You don't seem to matter. And the list goes on because we live in a bad world that is filled with injustice and discrimination, with violence and evil and pain.

We sometimes feel like giving up or giving in because we don't think we're going to win anyway. We try to live right but we come to the point where we just don't know how. We become terribly discouraged. Perhaps that is why, in a survey asking what sermons people want to hear, so many people listed either specific or general situations of harsh circumstances wondering how we, as Christians, can live a good life when we are surrounded by evil.

The Bible is filled with stories that are as vivid as the front page of today's newspaper and are as harsh as anyone could ever experience. Some people responded in bad ways while others responded wonderfully. Specifically there is advice that comes from the lips of Jesus in the New Testament that rises to the top as the lead advice for good living in a bad world.

Advice Number One is to please God first. II

Corinthians 5:9 says, "... (we) make it our goal to please (God)." Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6:33, "... seek first (God's) kingdom and his righteousness..." In other words, pleasing God is a decision. It becomes a mindset for everything that we do and everything that we think.

Perhaps the power of this principle is best understood when contrasted with other alternatives to top priorities in our lives. If, for example, I put money before God then profit is my greatest goal. Every week, every month and at the end of every year I need to be farther ahead financially than I was in the beginning of that time period. And I'll do whatever I need to do to be financially further ahead.

But the Bible says that while that is a common priority, it's a bad priority. Hebrews 13:5 says, "Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have." In I Timothy 6:10 we read, "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs." So we understand that some people have money as Number One and others have God as Number One.

If I put pride first then I'm most concerned about my own reputation. I want to win the favor of others and will do anything to advance my cause. If I put career first I'll step on other people in order to get ahead in my chosen profession. But by contrast, if I put God first the constant question in every situation is: What would make God happy?

Pleasing God first may result in different answers for different people. The issue is what will please God in a given situation.

As Christians, we need to take a long hard look into our hearts and into God's Word and ask what God wants us to do. Jesus tells us in the Bible that when we do this there will be two results. One: God will meet our needs; and two: we will not have to worry about tomorrow. So, please God first!

Advice Number Two is to think good stuff. Philippians 4:8 says, "... whatever is true, what-

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ever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.” In other words, what we think about is a significant factor in how we deal with the evil that is in our world.

I heard a story about a man who worried about bad things all the time. One day he was sitting at his desk and he worried and worried and worried until he passed out. He slumped to the floor with a loud crash. People came rushing into his office thinking that he had suffered a heart attack only to discover that he was so worried that it had rendered him unconsciousness.

Some of us may argue that we can't control what we think. But that's obviously not true because the Bible is telling us that we should think about good things.

Most of the time I fall asleep very quickly and easily. Usually I'm sound asleep in two or three minutes. Actually, I can go to sleep almost anywhere, anytime, under any circumstances. Here, I'll show you! But once in a while, sleep just doesn't come. I lie there watching the numbers pass on our digital clock. And I think.

Sometimes I think about bad things. I think about something that someone said. I imagine that they're going to act negatively toward me. And like an upside down pyramid, these negative thoughts keep getting bigger and bigger. It doesn't help me get to sleep!

So I stop, and I realize what I'm doing. Then I think about other things and I choose a different direction. I think about something good: “. . . whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.” It's a formula for good living in a bad world.

Very different but equally important advice comes from Romans 12:9 where it says, “Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.” As Christians we need to be careful that we never condone what is wrong. And most of us—most of the time—know what is wrong. Lying is wrong. Stealing is wrong. Murder is wrong. Adultery is wrong. Idolatry is wrong. Sexual harassment is wrong. Racial discrimination is wrong. Injustice to the poor is wrong. The trouble is we live in a culture that gives very high value to tolerance. The attitude is to let people do their own thing. Nothing is wrong as long as it doesn't hurt somebody else. And sometimes we

even go so far as to say that even if it does hurt somebody else it is still not wrong.

By contrast, previous generations said abortion was wrong or pornography or sexual relations outside of marriage. Today's generation says that's a matter of choice and personal preference. Having a tolerant attitude means we keep quiet and look the other way. We shut up and mind our own business. But the Bible says that we should hate what is evil and we should not condone anything that is wrong.

Let us also understand that while we cannot and should not condone sin, we do have to pick our battles. When Jesus was here on earth he was surrounded by thousands of people who did all kinds of things that were wrong, but he could not possibly confront all of them. He had to pick the ones he would confront.

There's a difference between not condoning and confronting. We need to be careful not to become so condemning of other people's sins and so confrontational that we become self-righteous nitpickers. We must be careful not to lift ourselves up as better than everyone else.

In the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7:3-5 Jesus asked:

Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.

In other words, we shouldn't be so condemning toward others that we forget about our own sinfulness. Clearly, don't condone sin, but also don't become totally focused and confrontational on the sins of others.

Advice Number Four is that we must believe that God is greater than evil. This is really important, but it takes a lot of faith to believe and follow this advice. The Bible teaches that there is this horrendous war going on between Satan and God, between evil and good. At times the layers are peeled back and we get a glimpse of the horrors of this great spiritual war. It shows up in things like the atrocities in Auschwitz or the slaughter of a half million people in Rwanda, the tragedy of the AIDS epidemic or the events of September 11.

But more often we see the battle between good

and evil in things like road rage or rape or marriages ending in unnecessary divorce or dishonest business deals or political rivalries or sick and dying children, children who have done nothing wrong.

But the Bible has some very good news. In I John 4:4 we are told that the Holy Spirit, who is inside of every Christian, is greater than the enemy, Satan, who is in the world. So when we are tired and beaten and discouraged we need to remember that God is going to have the ultimate victory. When it seems that the worst of evil is going to triumph we must believe from the bottom of our hearts that the Holy Spirit of God who is in us is greater than any evil enemy that is in the world.

All of this leads to a fifth and final piece of advice from the New Testament and from the lips of Jesus. It is that we treat other people well in the midst of whatever circumstance and situation we face for it is our treatment of others that especially distinguishes us as Christians. When we love our enemies, when we are kind to those who are unkind, when we forgive those who intentionally harm us and don't even want to be forgiven we show that we are really more like God than we are like those who do what is wrong.

The counsel of Jesus in Matthews 7:12, "do to others what you would have them do to you", has been dubbed The Golden Rule. As Christians, we treat others on the basis of the way we want to be treated and on the basis of the way God treats us not on the basis of the way they treat us. At least we try!

I try to do this. And I find that it can be wonderfully productive, although not guaranteed. When people criticize me I try not to criticize them back. When somebody writes something that is unkind, I try to respond with a call or a letter that is loving and gracious. When we go to a restaurant and the server treats us badly, as a Christian I try to be unusually generous to that person because our generosity is based not upon that person's behavior but on how I would like to be treated and how God has treated me.

Except, you say, some people are just impossible to get along with. When I treat them well, they treat me poorly. Sometimes I treat people with

kindness and they interpret the kindness in some negative way. What are we supposed to do in those situations?

God tells us in Hebrews 12:14, "Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy." What if it doesn't work? In a parallel teaching in Romans 12:17-18 we are told, "Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." So, as Christians, we do everything we possibly can to live at peace, regardless of what the other person says or does.

If the other person wants a lawsuit, make every effort to avoid it and to settle another way. If the other person wants a divorce, do everything you can to reconcile the marriage. If the other person wants to fight, do everything you can to avoid a fight and to live at peace. It is the Christian principle to do what is right no matter what the other person does. Be like Jesus!

Some months ago a single engine aircraft was flying at a surprisingly high altitude as it crossed the border into Peru along the Amazon River. A reconnaissance plane, owned and operated by the American Central Intelligence Agency, spotted the aircraft and reported it to the Peruvian Air Force. Fighter jets scrambled and, for whatever reason, didn't check the numbers and identify the aircraft

to find out who was in it. They failed to find the filed flight plan for that plane. They were on a different frequency and didn't hear the radio contact between the pilot and the control tower. They attacked and riddled that aircraft with bullets. They shot the pilot in both legs, disabling him significantly. One of the bullets went through a young

mother named Veronica Bowers, instantly killing her and continuing through her body into the head of her seven-month old daughter, killing her as well. The plane, still under attack, went into a steep descent and crash landed in the Amazon River where the pilot of the fighter jet continued to riddle the plane with bullets. He finally left.

Those who were in the place awaited rescue. There was the pilot we was bleeding profusely and a young father trying to console his eight-year old

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son while holding the body of his wife and baby daughter. After about forty-five minutes a dugout canoe with an outboard motor came to their aid. They weren't drug runners. They were Christian missionaries.

The funeral service for Veronica Bowers and her baby was held in Muskegon, Michigan. Her husband, Jim Bowers, spoke at that funeral. He said that he spoke for both himself and his wife Ronnie when he declared his love and forgiveness for that jet fighter pilot and the crew.

These missionaries hadn't done anything wrong. They were wounded and killed in a war between good and evil. They were casualties in a battle where all kinds of things went terribly wrong in a bad world. But they were Christians, and as Christians they believed in God and were committed to Jesus Christ and that led them to good living in a bad world.

We all have our situations. We had our situations last week, and we're going to have different situations next week. Some of us have been dealing with the great difficulties of harsh situations that have lasted for years and year and years. Who's been trying to shoot you down? Where are you in the midst of this conflict? What is going terribly wrong? Whatever it may be, remember to please God first and think good stuff. In the midst of whatever your situation, please do not condone what is wrong but believe that God is greater than any evil

that you're up against. And through it all, trust God to enable you to treat others well.

Our God, I pray especially for those who are in a ferocious battle, who are discouraged, downtrodden, wondering whether they should give up or give in. Give your special grace and your special strength to live Christianly. Help them toward good living in a bad world. Assure them of the Holy Spirit inside who is greater than he who is in the world. Give to them strength and victory through Jesus Christ. Amen.

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