

Paradise Lost and Restored: Are People Inherently Good or Evil?

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I. Introduction

Do you ever wonder if you're a good mother, father, son, daughter, employee, boss? In those moments, what causes you to doubt your goodness? Did you do something dumb, horrible, catastrophic? Is that why you think you've failed? Is it possible to fail miserably and still feel good about yourself? It sounds like a contradiction....but is it?

II. Yes, We Sin Now, but What was Our Starting Point?

Is man good or evil? English philosopher Thomas Hobbes believed that man by nature is selfish, bad, and that society makes him good. According to Hobbes, man invented civil society in order to force himself to be good. Thus, Hobbes saw man morally as selfish and competitive and ontologically (i.e., by nature), he's just a clever animal. On the other hand Genevan philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau believed that man by nature is essentially good and that society makes him bad. He saw man as a "noble savage" who has been taught to act badly, contrary to his nature, by society. Thus, Rousseau believed that man ontologically is good, that he is a kind of god, and that there's no such thing as sin. The only evil is belief in evil.....so who's right Hobbes or Rousseau?

The evidence is clear that man is definitely evil, there's no question that mankind is wicked. Look back at man's history as far as you can and you'll find man's atrocities scattered throughout. From the moment Cain murdered Abel to Hitler's genocide of the Jews to the current torture, mutilation, and rape by ISIS in Syria and Iraq, it is quite clear that man is evil.....so is he evil by nature or is man's nature good to start with?

What was our nature in the beginning...before sin entered the picture? *Adam and Eve before the Fall, Genesis 2*, yes, Cain murdered Abel, but this was not the way humanity started. When we were first created, we were not at each other's throats. We weren't raping and pillaging each other. There was absolute harmony between us and more importantly between us and God, which gave us harmony with each other. As a result, Adam and Eve were both secure in their identity (as heads over the earth), both knew that they needed each other, so no one was looking an angle. There were no feelings of self-doubt, guilt or shame.

Us before we are born, Psalm 139:13-16, like Adam and Eve, we had a pristine beginning. When God created us, He did not make addicts, pimps, prostitutes, or murderers. Before you were born God personally knitted you together into something marvelous and wonderful and with a specific purpose in life, Psalm 139:13-16. This is how every human being begins. So what goes wrong? Two things: (1) we carry in ourselves a sinful nature that we inherit from our ancestors Adam and Eve, and (2) Satan is hard at work tempting us to live by our sinful nature as he tempted our forefathers Adam and Eve, Genesis 4:7—but notice that it's possible to defeat Satan.

III. So We're Sinners who Sin, Does This Mean that all God Sees is a Sinner?

Does God condemn us or does He understand our plight? Adam and Eve, Genesis 3, some people, all they see in themselves and others is wretched sinners. The only reason they possess any good is because of their connection with Christ. There's some truth to this, but this is not the way God sees us. It's not the way He saw us in the beginning; it's not the way He sees us now. We are made in His image and He personally knit us together before we were born, so there is something good in each one of us. This is why after Adam and Eve sinned God's reaction was not to execute them but rescue them. He doesn't see them as wretched sinners, but as His beloved children (who are still His heads over the earth but) who have now fallen for the enemy's temptation. This is why He's willing to pay for their sins with His life in order to restore them to their rightful place, Genesis 3:15, 21.

The Woman at the Well, John 4, Jesus strikes up a conversation with a woman whom He knows is currently living in sin. How does Jesus react to her sin? He brings it up but not to condemn her. This woman has been looking for happiness, for salvation, in the arms of a man, but she hasn't found it. She's had five husbands and is currently shacking up with a sixth man, but still she thirsts. Jesus brings up her past but He uses it to save her. She's so convinced that Jesus can end her thirst for happiness that she runs into town to tell everyone about Jesus' salvation. Now did you notice that Jesus never once condemn her sinful behavior or asked her to stop sinning? It's not that He doesn't care about our sin. He does, deeply, but not the way we might think. He understands that we've been deceived by life, by Satan, which is why He's so patient with us. He knows that once we give Him our heart, then we'll let go of the sin we so desperately thought we needed.

Does God condemn us or our sin? The Man with a 38-year illness, John 5, in this instance Jesus doesn't mention the sin up front; He mentions it later. There's a man who has been suffering from a 38-year illness which made him an invalid. He wants desperately to be healed, but he can't get to the pool fast enough. Jesus takes pity on him and heals him. Later, Jesus runs into him again and says, "See, you have been made well. *Sin no more*, lest a worse thing come upon you." And this is the moment we realize that this man was ill because of his own sin. So how does God see our sin? He doesn't condemn us for it. Instead He wants to rescue us from it, which is why He helps us even though it's our fault. This is also why He urges us not to sin because He knows how debilitating it is to our lives.

Applying what you've learned, Satan wants you to see yourself (and others) as a wretched sinner because when you do he gains control of your life. He'll get you to chase after false solutions or he'll stop you from living the life God gave you. You'll constantly live in guilt, doubt, and shame. The next time you're tempted to doubt your self-worth, remember who God made you before you were born. And the next time you commit a horrendous sin, remember that God died to set you free from that too...and then run to Him for salvation.

IV. Conclusion

"Woe to the rebellious children," says the LORD, "Who take counsel, but not of Me, and who devise plans, but not of My Spirit, that they may add sin to sin;.....He will be very gracious to you at the sound of your cry; when He hears it, He will answer you.