

▸ 7. The Problem of Evil

John Warwick Montgomery, “*Sensible Christianity*” [an audio series]

Outline by Timothy R. Petty (I.S.O.T., Spring 1991); ed. Scott L. Keith (Concordia University Irvine, Spring 1994); ed. Jennn Herzberg (Concordia University Irvine, Fall 2001)

I. ▸ **Introduction**

A. ▸ What do we mean by “the problem of evil?”

1. ▸ We mean that the universe contains all kinds of problems.

a. ▸ “Moral evils” (nasty, murderous people)

b. ▸ “Natural evils” (earthquakes, tornadoes, and other assorted miseries)

B. ▸ Non-Christian observes the evil in the world and says: “Don’t even bother me with any evidence for the existence of your god, and don’t bother me with the Bible—because your notion of God is *incompatible* with the way the world is. You claim that your god is both all-powerful and that he is love. The very fact that evil is here shows that this kind of god simply doesn’t exist. Logically, there *couldn’t be* such a god. The very fact that evil is here shows that this kind of God simply could not exist.”

1. ▸ argument based on the idea that if God is good, then the world *has to be* good

2. ▸ fact that evil exists proves that a god who is both omnipotent and good *cannot* exist

3. ▸ If He did exist, then He would *not* allow for evil to exist in the world.

II. ▸ **Compatibility as the Sole Issue**

A. ▸ The above argument is based upon the mistaken notion that the Christian view of God is *incompatible* with the sinful nature of the world.

B. ▸ This charge is a simple question of compatibility, of consistency—no more!

1. ▸ The proper response to this argument is simply to show that the Christian view of God is *not* incompatible with the way the world is—(again, no more!)

a. ▸ is *not* necessary at this stage of the game to show that God is either good or all-powerful

b. ▸ is *not* necessary at this stage of the game to show that the Bible is true

c. ▸ is *only* necessary to show that an all-powerful and all-good God can exist and the world still contain evil

2. ▸ Goal: to push the non-Christian to see that the existence of evil in the world is *not* a sufficient reason for him to avoid the cross of Christ

C. ▸ This conversation with the non-Christian may go through at least three or four levels.

III. ▸ **Level One: “Evil is *not* from God.”**

A. ▸ God is *not* presented in the Bible as the cause of the evil in the world.

1. ▸ Bible claims that evil originated *not* with God but with the *creature*

B. ▸ Lucifer, an angel, rebelled against God and fell into sin.

1. ▸ As a result of this decision against God, evil (with all of its physical consequences) entered the universe.

C. ▸ Adam, similarly, decided against God.

1. ▶ Man, as a result of this decision, brought destruction upon himself.
2. ▶ Evil (with all its physical consequences) entered the world.
 - a. ▶ The result was that ground produced thistles instead of food, man would labor and sweat during work, woman's childbearing would be painful, etc.
 - b. ▶ Paul: "...the whole creation groans in the turmoil and pain of childbirth..."
- D. ▶ "In Adam's Fall, we fell all." (*McGuffey's Reader*)
 1. ▶ word "Adam" in Hebrew means "mankind" (as well as being name of the individual)
 - a. ▶ Adam was genuinely *representative of all* mankind.
 - b. ▶ was "a perfect statistical sampling" of the whole yet-to-be-born human race and every individual in it
 2. ▶ means none of us can "play the victim," and blame Adam for our condition
 - a. ▶ Why?
 - b. ▶ because "we are (finally) *all* Adam"; he was our true representative.
 3. ▶ The major differences between Adam and people born after Adam are:
 - a. ▶ Adam had a completely free will, genuine freedom of choice
 - b. ▶ All men born *after* Adam are born into a world that Adam conditioned
 - i. ▶ (a world conditioned—both hereditarily *and* environmentally—by Adam's sin)
 - ii. ▶ *Our* choices are only choices between various sinful possibilities—*not* a choice between good & evil
 - (1). ▶ Luther: "People subsequent to Adam have the complete free will to choose their own poison!"
 - c. ▶ John Donne: "You ask for whom the bell tolls? It tolls for thee."
 - i. ▶ The entire human race is integrated, inter-locked.

IV. ▶ **Level Two: "But why, then, did God *allow* sin?"**

- A. ▶ Being love, God created Adam with free will [see C.S. Lewis' *The Problem of Pain*]
 1. ▶ "Free will" = man's ability to choose to *accept* God's love or to choose *not* to accept it
 2. ▶ For God to create as a loving God, His creatures *had to* be able to have free will (in order that they could choose Him or not)
- B. ▶ "Love and free will are logically correlative."
 1. ▶ Logically, you cannot have love without the possibility of rejection.
 - a. ▶ Love & the possibility of rejection go together (musical "Annie, Git Your Gun": "Love and marriage . . .")
 - b. ▶ Illustration: after a date (standing at door), "I'm glad you had a good time tonight. Now, one more thing: Love me!"
 - i. ▶ Such compulsion makes love impossible.
 - (1). ▶ Real love *cannot be compelled* or forced.
 - ii. ▶ Illustration: God as "Cosmic Puppeteer"
 - (1). ▶ God creates Adam.

- (2). ▶ Leans over the parapets of heaven and asks (while working the strings), “Adam, do you love me?”
 - (3). ▶ Adam “responds”, “Yes Lord, I love you”
 - (4). ▶ would be a *parody* of love, but *not love* (love and the possibility of rejection go together)
- 2. ▶ Love and possibility of rejection always go together.
 - a. ▶ Love cannot be compelled; it must be freely chosen.
 - b. ▶ God giving Adam & Eve the free will to choose to love Him is the ultimate expression of love.
- C. ▶ The futility of overprotection as a form of “love”
 - 1. ▶ Illustration: a newspaper reporter discovers a mother who has kept her son, Lemuel, in the attic for 36 years.
 - a. ▶ Interviewer asks: “Why did you keep Lemuel in the attic for his whole 36 years?”
 - b. ▶ mother’s answer: “It was the only way I could ensure that he would not suffer or make bad choices.”
 - c. ▶ Lemuel is, of course, “mad as a march hare!”
 - 2. ▶ There is no guarantee that children will not grow up to “spit in the face” of their parents.
 - a. ▶ is why some couples opt to have no children
- V. ▶ **Level Three: “Alright! Alright! A God of love *is* compatible with evil in the world. But wouldn’t it be possible to permit genuine free choice, but not allow the awful consequences (wars, miseries, etc.) that come from this?”**
 - A. ▶ Answer: “No, you could *not* because the effects and consequences of the choice are bound up with the choice itself. You *cannot* have a genuine, free choice in isolation from effects.”
 - B. ▶ In order for there to be genuine free choice on moral issues, there must be *consequences* which coincide with the choices made.
 - 1. ▶ Illustration: you say to your son, “Son, whatever you do, don’t invert this ashtray and its contents on the clean rug because your mother wants to keep the carpet clean.”
 - 2. ▶ son immediately turns the ashtray & its contents upside-down
 - 3. ▶ But you have a “Rube Goldberg contraption built into your chair! bucket hidden next to you and rush to catch the water & dirt before they hit the carpet
 - a. ▶ You press a button and it immediately catches the ashtray & its contents before they hit the carpet.
 - b. ▶ next time, son tries to find some way to avoid your new ingenious protective plan.
 - c. ▶ Eventually the whole thing quickly becomes a non-moral game!

- VI. ▶ **Level Four: “But why are there *so many* effects, such as *dire* consequences e.g., the death of six million Jews?” The answer is three-fold:**
- A. ▶ First, according to the Bible, God *does* limit the consequences of sin
1. ▶ If He did not, we would have destroyed ourselves by now—a sort of “eschatological entropy!”
 2. ▶ “Civilization” is a gift from God, by means of which He prevents us from destroying each other.
 3. ▶ The “Orders of Creation”
 - a. ▶ The Reformers said that God gave us the family, the state & political order, the economic order, the educational system, etc. to prevent sinners from wreaking havoc in this world, from completely destroying each other.
 4. ▶ Illustration of the effect of the “political order”:
 - a. ▶ Hobbes noted in his *Leviathan* that “. . .human life is nasty, brutish and short.”
 - b. ▶ Without the state, humans would be eating each other!
 - c. ▶ The state prevents “might makes right” situation that would eliminate *any* sort of meaningful society.
 - i. ▶ Example: in times of earthquake or riot (e.g. Watts, San Francisco, Lisbon) result is that good citizens are often out looting!
 - ii. ▶ Civilization “sits very lightly on us” and, according to the Bible, “civilization” is God’s gift to us (by means of which God restrains us from destroying ourselves.)
 - iii. ▶ This could similarly be illustrated using other “Orders of Creation” (e.g., marriage)
- B. ▶ Second, God died in Christ to deal with our fundamental problem of sin.
1. ▶ Since we had freely chosen evil, Christ’s death for our salvation was an undeserved gift.
 - a. ▶ “For a good man, perhaps a man would even dare to die. But God demonstrates His love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” (Rom. 5: 7-8)
 - b. ▶ Illustration: main character in Dickens’ *Tale of Two Cities*—“It is a far, far better thing I do than I have ever done.”
 - i. ▶ Character obviously felt that his “double” was of much more value to society than he was.
 - ii. ▶ About the best that human love does is to die for someone who is equal to oneself or worth more than oneself.
 2. ▶ But God goes much farther—In Christ He dies for us who are *not* of such value!
- C. ▶ Thirdly, God will rectify the whole mess at the End.
1. ▶ God will, at the end, bring good out of unspeakable evil.
 2. ▶ There will be a new heavens and a new earth; “. . .and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. . .”

3. ▶ There will be a coming ultimate eschatological glory in which righteousness finally dwells.
4. ▶ Upshot: The locus of the problem is with the creature—*not* with God!

VII. ▶ **Augustine and the Question of a Repeating Cycle of Falls**

- A. ▶ What if, after the heavenly “clean-up”, the whole drama would begin again?
 1. ▶ “Would we still have free will, which could *again* be misused?”
 2. ▶ “The problem could start all over again, could it not?”
- B. ▶ Augustine speculated as follows:
 1. ▶ Adam’s Fall had a “spillover effect” to the whole human race, a conditioning to evil that continues on through the history of the human race.
 2. ▶ Christ satisfied God’s conditions & law, dying for all of mankind.
 3. ▶ Augustine: “Perhaps Christ’s perfect life and atoning death has a similar “spillover effect” for the whole human race?”
 - a. ▶ That is, Christ’s act for the sake of fallen mankind was *so* good that it affects the future of mankind for the ages upon ages . . .”
- C. ▶ Further reading:
 1. ▶ At lay level: best is C.S. Lewis’ *The Problem of Pain*
 2. ▶ at philosophical level: best is Alvin Plantinga’s *God and Other Minds*
 3. ▶ John Hick’s idea of “eschatological verification” is singularly *unhelpful*.
 - a. ▶ “Eschatological verification” is hardly helpful for the person dealing with the epistemological question *now*!