

Reception Perception

The world doesn't see things the way God sees things, and vice-versa. You hear God already making this abundantly clear through the prophet Isaiah. "*Your thoughts are not My thoughts, and My ways are not your ways.*" This is one reason I find today's Gospel parable so fascinating. Jesus is actually teaching this parable, not from God's perspective, **but from man's perspective; from the way we see things**. Just look at verse 10. Jesus says that the King's servants went out into all the crossroads and ways of the world and gathered everyone they could find into the banquet—**both evil and good**. *Doesn't that strike you as strange?* We understand that this is a parable about the heavenly, eternal wedding banquet. There's no mystery here. *So...evil people will be in heaven too?* *That is what the original Greek says! It doesn't say "bad." "Bad" is a watered-down, sanded-down, softened-up translation. "Bad" is a bad translation! The original text says "*ponārous kai agathous*," evil and good. (It's the same word that Jesus uses when He teaches, "*Deliver us from evil—ponārou.*" Jesus doesn't say, "*Deliver us from bad.*") **This just doesn't make sense!** If evil people are going to be in heaven, then why try?! Why bother?! If it doesn't matter whether I'm good or evil, then I may as pull out all the stops and enjoy myself in the short amount of time I have here.

Hold up! Before we get too far down the road to perdition, we should probably step back and examine what exactly Jesus is saying here. And before we do that, we need to make crystal-clear—right up front—that from the perspective of God, evil is **anything** that stands in opposition to Him and His good/holy will. "*Those who aren't with Me are against Me.*" In terms of salvation, the only thing that damns a person is the evil of unbelief; the evil of impenitence; the evil of rejecting God and His Gospel. This is most certainly true.

But...Jesus isn't teaching this parable from God's perspective! He's teaching this parable from man's perspective. He's explaining God's heavenly feast the way Old Adam sees things. *It will help if we keep in mind the fact that Jesus is teaching this parable to a large group of people in the Temple **the day after Palm Sunday**. Calvary's cross is only five days away when Jesus is teaching this, and the crowd He's teaching is comprised of the lowliest of faithful disciples (e.g., tax collectors and former prostitutes) as well as a large group of chief priests, elders, and Pharisees; i.e., the "religious elite."

Knowing what we already know, it's easy to look back and recognize the religious establishment as "evil." From God's perspective—the perspective of repentant saving faith—**this is true**. These guys didn't believe Jesus was the Christ. They didn't believe that all their good works amounted to nothing in terms

of salvation. They saw **NO** need to repent of **ANYTHING** in their lives. They were absolutely convinced that their masterful keeping of all 613 of their own Rabbinic laws made them the guests of honor at God's heavenly banquet. They would be doing God a *favor* by showing up at His banquet. Heaven would rejoice because these guys would enter in and grace the heavenly host with their presence. It's easy to recognize such self-righteous arrogance as "evil."

But...from man's perspective—using the world's working definition—*these guys really were "good."* They weren't bad or evil people! They didn't do bad and evil things. In fact, they were the best, most upstanding and good people you would know. *You couldn't get "gooder" than them.* You would hope that your boys would grow up to be Pharisees. You would hope that your girls would marry a Pharisee. You would want to have a Pharisee as your neighbor. These guys were the best.

On the other side of the "good/evil continuum" were the tax collectors and the prostitutes; the cripples; the lepers. These were the lowest of the low. *These were "evil" people that God clearly had a problem with.* But still...at least they were Israelites. They at least had their bloodline going for them. Having Abraham as their father would at least keep them out of hell. To go outside of Israel though... to go to the territories outside of Israel was to venture into Samaritan country; into Gentile territory. *This is where "true evil" dwelt!* Samaritan? Evil. Canaanite? Evil. Roman Centurion? Evil. Anyone living on the Gennesaret side of the Sea of Galilee? *The demonic pigs had as much standing as anyone living in Gennesaret.* If you didn't have Abraham as your father, you were about as evil as you could get.

It's within this context that Jesus is teaching this parable. So...that still doesn't explain the whole "evil and good" together at the heavenly banquet. Does this mean that God is not a just God? Is God a *flaming softy universalist*; i.e., "everyone goes to heaven because God loves everyone and He would never send anyone to hell"? No. This is most certainly **NOT** true! *See things the way Jesus is teaching here!*

Seated at this heavenly banquet table are all those who answered the King's royal invitation. Whether the rest of the world saw them as "good" or "evil" (Pharisees or Gentiles or anywhere in between) didn't matter. They were welcomed into God's royal feast. *Why?* Because they responded to His gracious calling/ invitation. They responded in faith to their Lord and King. Believe it or not, but not *all* Pharisees were condemned to hell in wicked unbelief. Guys like Nicodemus would come to believe and die in the faith. A former Pharisee by the name of Saul wound up being one of God's chief instruments in evangelism and ministry. You know... "the apostle to the lowly (evil) Gentiles," St. Paul himself,

and I don't think anyone doubts that St. Paul is seated at that heavenly feast table right now.

Folks: God doesn't care how men see you! That doesn't factor into His love and mercy for you, as if God has to wait and see how the popular vote turns out before He'll have anything to do with you. God doesn't care how many people follow you on Instagram. He doesn't care how many Facebook friends you have. God isn't concerned with whether or not the popular girls like you. ***Do you believe? Do you hold fast to Him and Him alone?***

From our perspective and by our standards, we would look to heaven and see some really good people—salt of the earth—and we would also see some pretty shady and evil people; people like the thief on the cross or anyone else who came to faith after living the life of a reprobate and dreg of society (e.g. Jeffery Dahmer or Nazi Field Marshall Wilhelm Keitel, both men who died confessing Christ in repentant, saving faith). This is how we see things. This is how we are constantly seeing our fellow man. Where do we fit in? Better? Worse?

God, however, sees us children of Adam differently. He looks at us—all of us borne of Adam—and sees only evil. ***All*** have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. ***All*** are dead in the evil of their sin. ***All*** are in need of a Savior, which is why Jesus died for ***everyone***. God so loved the ***whole world*** that He sent His only-begotten Son to die for it—each and every person borne from Adam. Now...do some reject this gift of grace? Yes. It's what I often refer to as "the tragedy of justification." Christ died for all people. His death and resurrection has paid the wage of sin for everyone. All have been set free in Him...***and yet so many still reject it.*** "*The many are called, but few are chosen.*"

Now, to be sure, there is a whole lot more we could talk about today. There's a whole month of sermons on just the proverbial party crasher getting bounced from heaven because he's not wearing the King's robe. Suffice it to say, the guy was bounced because ***he wanted God on his terms; not God's terms.*** He didn't want what God gave. He didn't want or have the King's royal robes; the only acceptable attire. His own rejection of the King's grace is what got him booted.

And before you start worrying about whether or not you're one of the chosen/elect, keep in mind: ***No one was at this banquet because they deserved to be there!*** No one was "good enough" to be there. Even those deemed "the very best" by their fellow man in this fallen and sinful world had nothing but soiled, sinful rags to present to the King. This is why the King so graciously gives them everything they need for His banquet. He gives to them His royal robes; the only robes that will suffice for such a grand, royal affair. By the King's good grace,

these folks—both “good and evil”—are covered over in His righteousness. His royal righteousness is the only acceptable attire. From the King’s perspective, all who were covered over in His royal robes were deemed “good.” They were all honored, welcomed guests at His feast table.

So...what does all this mean for us today? Our Lord teaches this parable from the perspective of man so that we can get *a better understanding of God’s perspective*; a better perspective/understanding of God’s unconditional grace. By virtue of your baptism into Christ and His death/resurrection, you have been covered over in His perfect righteousness. **Don’t ever forget this!** The rest of the world may see you differently. In fact, they usually do. It’s nothing new. Isaiah was already warning the Israelites 700 years before Christ was born, “Woe to those who call evil good and good evil...” (Is 5:20). Standing firm in the faith nowadays makes us “evil” to **MANY** people. Just think of all the evil that is propagated today in the name of “goodness, tolerance, inclusivity, and love.” ***To reject such things is “evil.”*** To receive God’s Word and means of grace on His terms (and not our self-centered terms); to stand firm in the exclusivity of faith alone, grace alone, Christ alone can be *very lonely and painful sometimes*, to the point that you actually start to wonder if maybe you really are the evil one. There are times that we see “evil” people getting ahead, and “good” people getting dumped on. There are times that we’re scorned and rejected, deemed “evil” and “unloving.” There are times that it feels like maybe even God has forsaken us; kicked us to the curb. We feel the crushing weight of the crosses we bear, and there are times that we look around and doubt and despair and wonder, *“Is it all really worth it? Why try? Why bother?”*

My friends: Look to this cross! Look to your baptism! ***This is how God sees you!*** No matter how bad or evil or wicked the days may be; no matter how others may see you, ***you stand before God sopping wet, soaked in the baptismal robes of Christ’s perfect righteousness.*** When God looks to you, He sees you through the lens of Christ and His cross. He sees you through the cruciform wounds of Christ. He sees “good,” you know...as is “Good Friday” good. Kind of puts everything else in proper perspective, doesn’t it?

My fellow baptized: May this Christ-centered perspective be your perspective, now and into all eternity. In His holy name....

AMEN