

Overcome Good With Evil

When Barbara and I have to make a long drive, one of the things we do to pass the time is listen to podcasts and books on tape. We took a big family vacation in June. The trip involved planes, trains, and automobiles. Our last leg was a 9- hour drive home from Chicago. On that trip we were listening to one of Barbara's favorite podcasts. The host was interviewing the author of a book entitled Dreamland. Dreamland is a non-fiction history of the opioid crisis in America from 1995-2014. It traces the rise of Oxycontin and the simultaneous rise of Black Tar Heroin. That sounded interesting to me, so I downloaded the book on my Kindle.

I have to say that was a rather difficult book to read. I read stories of both corporate and individual greed. I read stories of the desperation of people driven by the specter of addiction. I read heartbreaking stories of families broken apart by this terrible scourge. As I was coming to the end of the book, I had an epiphany. I had a revelation so profound it cold chills down my spine.

I'm going to share that revelation with you this morning, but before I do I need to give you some contexts. I'm going to tell you two stories about my life that will set the stage for the revelation I share with you.

The first story is one that some of you have heard before. In the PC(USA), seminary is normally a three-year process. For me it took four years because deliberately took a year-long internship between my second and third years. That was in 1994 and 1995. During that year, I worked for an inner-city church in Mobile, serving Homeless people. One of the things that I did was to provide breakfast for the group. Well, we actually served sandwiches, but we served it at breakfast time.

We served it in the basement of the church. That's where the church's Fellowship Hall was. This was in the days before cell phones were common, and so one of the ministries we offered was a phone. We had an old landline phone on the wall. Long distance calls were blocked, but they could make local calls and toll-free calls. One day, I noticed one of our regulars was on the phone. As time went by, he became more and more agitated, until eventually, he slammed the phone down and stormed towards the door.

Now, as a pastor I am trained to approach such things gently. So, I slowly approached and said, "Hey man, do you want to tell me about it?" In response he reached out and grabbed me. He wasn't attacking me; he was embracing me. I stood there and hugged that man, while he cried on my shoulder. He told me his story as he began to collect himself. He said he was a veteran who had been living on the street for eight years. He was in the midst of fighting the VA to pay for his cancer treatment, and having to do that while living on the street. I realized in that moment, that I was likely the only person upon whom he could depend. I may have been the only person in the world even willing to give him a hug.

The second story happened years later in 1999. I was serving as pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Jackson, AL. I had recently met my wife, Barbara, but we were not yet married. Barbara went out-of-town for the weekend for reasons related to work. It was Sunday morning, and I was getting ready for church. I was in the bathroom shaving and I sneezed. Now, that's so unusual. I have allergy problems, and I have sneezed virtually every day of my life.

This time was different. When I sneezed a muscle in my lower back seized. I felt the most intense pain I have ever felt in my life. I'm not ashamed to say I screamed. What's worse is that the pain continued. I could feel that muscle in my back trembling, as if my back were about to give way.

But it was Sunday morning, so I struggled through: somehow, I finished shaving; somehow, I dressed myself; somehow, I got into the car and drove to the church; somehow, I got myself out of the car and went inside. I made it through that sermon by holding myself upright, using the pulpit as a crutch.

Later that night, after I somehow got myself back home, I got a call from Barbara. She was on her way home. Barbara is retired now, but she practiced Nurse Anesthesia for decades. At the time she was the sole person in the city of Jackson who was licensed to provide anesthesia. She worked at the local hospital. Once per month an orthopedic surgeon came to Jackson to offer his services, and by God's providence, the next day was the day he was scheduled to come to Jackson. Barbara told me to come to the hospital first thing the next day and she would get me in to see him.

So, the next day I went to see him. He gave me a shot for the pain, told me I needed to do some exercises, and sent me home. Now, at this point, you may be asking how these two stories connect to the book.

Well, one of the things that I learned from the book was that the FDA first approved Oxycontin for prescriptions in 1995. Sales representatives from Purdue Pharma were crisscrossing the country, telling doctors their product wasn't addictive- that it would cure their patient's pain, without any meaningful side-effects. They did their job so well, that eventually insurance companies wouldn't reimburse for traditional therapies. As a result, some half a million Americans have died from overdose. Millions more have had their lives shattered.

Oxycontin was approved for prescription in 1995. I injured my back in 1999 and was prescribed physical therapy, but I might just as easily have been prescribed Oxycontin. The revelation I had, reading that book Dreamland was that it could have been. It's the one of the oldest realizations in history. There but for the Grace of God I. It wasn't just that. I thought to myself, if that were me, would there be anyone there for me, the way I was able to be there for that man in 1994? Who would be there to embrace me? That question has haunted me ever since.

In this section of his Letter to the Romans, Paul gives a list of exhortations. You might think of it as a sort of to do list for how we, as Christians, should act. The mere thought of a passage like this might seem incompatible with our faith. After all, we've been told over and over and over that we are not saved by our works. So then, what place does a list of virtues have in our faith?

Well, I agree that we are not saved by good works. We are saved for them. Consider this passage, "For it is by grace you have saved, through faith- and this is not from ourselves, it is the gift of God- not by works, so that no one can boast." That's clear, incontrovertible evidence that we are not saved by our works. The thing is people conveniently skip the very next verse. "For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared for us in advance for us to do." Not only were we created to do good works, but God created those works for us in advance.

So, now that we understand that we were created to do good works, what does that look like. I think one way to answer that question is to look at this list in Romans. I'm going to do something novel. I'm going to conflate these two passages from Ephesians and Romans. I'm making that choice for theological reasons, because I believe that my view reflects what Paul is trying to say.

Paul tells us to overcome evil with good. In fact, I believe that's why you and I were created. In our Sunday school we have been talking about the nature of evil. We've been studying the book Christian Doctrine by Shirley Guthrie. In the book, one of the questions we find is why evil happens? What is its cause? In the final analysis, neither I nor Guthrie nor anyone else has a good answer. The Bible doesn't attempt to answer that question. Instead, it says we were created to overcome evil with good.

Imagine for a moment that you were that man I met in that church in Mobile. Who would be there for you? Would there be anyone there just to give you a hug? Just someone there to show you that they cared about you? I'm telling you that there's someone in your orbit right now who needs to know that. There's evil going on around you that you can overcome with good.

You know, as much as I agree that we are saved by grace and not by works, I counsel you not to use that as an excuse to change the subject. There's no need for us to do good works because we are saved by grace.

I want to encourage you to view things from a different perspective. Precisely because you are saved by the grace of Jesus Christ, you are now free to fulfill your purpose. You are free to be the person you were created to be. You are now free to overcome evil with good.