

FAITH ASKING QUESTIONS



A ST FRANCIS COLLEGE SHORT COURSE

THE TRANSCRIPT

Episode 4 Evil and What to do about it

4.2 Is a person born evil, do they become evil, or is there another interpretation for behaviour that we perceive to be intrinsically evil?

Peter Kline: One of the most complicated and controversial theological topics is this whole question of original sin, which is an attempt to delve into these questions about: Are we born sinful? Are we born evil? Is that an intrinsic part of how we come into the world? Or is sinfulness (this is the way Christian theology tends to talk about it) something that comes later? Is it an intrinsic make up of who we are or is it a result of choice? Do we choose to become evil, to become sinners? Again, there's very different answers to this across the theological spectrum. Different Christians and theologians will answer it very differently.

Jeremy Greaves: I don't think anyone can look at a tiny baby and say this person is evil. The gift we're given, the gift of life is that we are created in the image of God, and I think ultimately, we are created good. That's the difference between thinking about original sin, and original blessing. God looks at the world created and says "this is good" then we muck it up. So, I think that people are born inherently good, but we have a great capacity to go off the rails and do wrong things. People make all sorts of decisions for all sorts of reasons and sometimes we make bad decisions which can lead to great tragedy and terrible things can happen.

Sometimes they are decisions we make consciously. Other times they are decisions we make because we find ourselves in a place because of structural evil that has placed us in a particular place in society or in the world where we don't have the capacity to make the same sorts of decisions as others.

So, I think there are all sorts of things that can lead to evil acts happening, but I think ultimately that person who has done the most horrific thing, I don't think they can be defined by that thing. Because at the heart of the faith there's some stuff about redemption that suggests that even for the worst possible person, the good that was part of them from the beginning can triumph



Penny Jones: I think there is a story of a teacher asking school children and saying “if all the good people are red and all the bad people are blue, what will you be?” and a child replies “Well Miss, I’d be streaky” and that’s spot on isn’t it? There’s the good and the bad in all of us and we are all of us the sum of our lives – of the things that have happened to us, and indeed perhaps happened before we were born – that are in our genetic makeup, in our family circumstances that are in the national and international circumstances into which we are born.

So, an enormous number of factors play into how our “goodness” or our “badness” develops within us. It’s very hard for us to see those things sometimes because we stand in our own light and some of what makes us tremendously good is also the very thing that make us very bad – what psychologists sometimes refer to as “the shadow” - that which projects the greatest light also has the deepest darkness.

So, all of us have good and bad. When Jesus was asked about the blind man “Who sinned? This man or his parents? That this man was born blind?” Jesus says “None of that, none of that applies.” That each and every one of us, like the blind man, is here in our own way, as best as we are able, to show something of the glory of God. And the factors that play into our lives will to greater or lesser extents, and at different times, obscure that, but the reality of the light of God in every person remains.

Peter Kline: One of the most common ways that Christianity has told the story about human beings and our relation to evil is through the whole story of The Fall. The way Christians generate this story is that we go to Genesis, the first book in the Bible, we read the story of Adam and Eve. They were created by God as the first human beings and were told, given a few guidelines of what they could and could not do. God told them they couldn’t eat the fruit of a particular tree, but they did it anyway. This was a transgression, a first sin that plunged the rest of the human race into the status of being sinner. From then on all of the Adam and Eve’s descendants were born sinners, because in doing the first sin, Adam and Eve corrupted human nature itself. That Adam and Eve corrupted human nature itself, such that any reproduction of human nature down through the centuries, down through the ages, will be born evil. So all of us, because we are descendants of Adam and Eve are now born evil.

That’s a very common story that Christianity has told. It has also come under massive criticism from a lot of different angles. From within and outside of Christianity. It is very problematic for all sorts of reasons, to say that human nature has become evil. Precisely where you locate the nature of that evil? Often times there’s been a tendency in Christianity to say that if you want to talk about the heart of that evil, we need to talk about desire and sexuality. That somehow desire and sexuality is bound up with the core of what it means for people to be evil. Which again has been massively critiqued from all different angles, that that way of construing the innateness of human evil, brings all sorts of problematic relations to ourselves, the ways we can think about our bodies, the way we think about human relations all different kinds of stuff.



That's not to say that the way to counteract the problematic ways Christianity has construed humans being born into sin (as it were) is to simply swing to this optimistic, and romantic view of life "We just need to affirm ourselves as good, we are all basically good. All this talk about humans being evil is pessimistic, or too much. We just need to think of ourselves as good rather than evil." I don't think this is helpful. If you simply look around the world and if you look into the intimate corners of the human heart, there is a lot of brokenness everywhere...it goes all the way to the biggest reaches of human existence, to how we organise countries and societies, and the whole sweep of history.

But also, again, the most intimate aspects of human hearts and lives, there's brokenness everywhere. How do we make sense of that? It seems that even from the very earliest stages of human existence, there are things like selfishness and struggle. We struggle to learn how to respect and relate to each other. How do you make sense of that? How do you make sense of the disordered and broken nature of human existence all the way down? So, I still think something like Original Sin can be a helpful category. But it may be more helpful to think of it not in terms of an intrinsic aspect of myself, or what I'm born with...but what the world does to me when I'm born into the world. I think that's a more helpful way of talking of original sin, that we live in a world that has various structures into which we are all born. We inevitably participate in the brokenness of the world's structures in all kinds of ways and none of us can escape that... to not talk of it in terms of the individual but about the world and that we are all born into a broken world. I think that's a more helpful way to talk about the issue.

Marian Free: I think that peoples' experience can cause them to shut themselves off from God which is my definition of evil. The situation of being abused – that you lose all sense of self you lose all sense of the other, so that what we would call evil is a consequence of you just trying to survive, your way of coping with the world. That's not something that you're born with, that's something that's inflicted upon you by your life experience. But if you read Paul, Paul would say that our disobedience, our sense of being cut off from God is something that we inherit from Adam. That's a different thing from original sin though, it's a sense of wilfulness, of disobedience and Paul would argue that Jesus has reversed that by Jesus' obedience and complete submission to God.

Jeremy Greaves: Do Anglicans believe in sin? I think absolutely. Its deeply a part of who we are. In our liturgy week by week we have a time of confession and absolution which is about recalling the ways we've fallen short of what God calls us to be and so that's part of our understanding of sin. Personal sin? The same way with evil, I think there's that sort of corporate sin...the ways as communities or as humanity we behave that is sinful as well.



You can find the video of this session, along with reflection questions for individuals or groups at www.stfran.qld.edu.au under “SFC Short Courses—Faith Asking Questions”.

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